

# Government to business stakeholder communication: "From sing and dance to show and tell."

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Nadia Kähkönen  
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Case of Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development

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**Objective of the Study**

The present Thesis study focuses on investigating government to business stakeholder communication through the Case Entity's – the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD) – communication practices with the key stakeholder group of Finnish companies. The research aims to answer how the FNCSD works to communicate to its corporate stakeholders and how its communication is perceived by corporate stakeholders.

**Methodology**

The research was conducted as a qualitative single case study with 12 semistructured, thematic interviews. Two employees from the Secretariat of the National Commission and ten corporate participants were interviewed; the latter ten interviewees represented the different corporate stakeholders of interest to the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development.

**Findings**

The findings of this study indicate that the FNCSD should take the approach of “showing and telling” to ensure positively perceived communication from the side of corporate stakeholders: explicitly communicating clear messages and presenting concrete value added that stakeholders would get from adhering to the communication. Additionally, the use of strategic intermediaries was highlighted as an important medium to improve dialogue between corporate stakeholders and the FNCSD as well as to enhance the government body's credibility. The study also showed that corporate stakeholders would equate the nature and transparency of the FNCSD's own governance with the nature of its communication. Furthermore, the FNCSD itself struggles in balancing the demands from corporate stakeholders and the expectations from Finnish government regarding the approach to government communication

**Keywords:** stakeholder communication, stakeholder theory, sustainable development, public diplomacy, government to business

## **Sidosryhmäviestintä G2B-suhteessa**

### **– tutkimuskohteena Suomen Kestävän kehityksen toimikunta**

#### **Tutkimuksen tavoitteet**

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää valtion ja yksityisen sektorin välistä sidosryhmäviestintää kestävän kehityksen kontekstissa. Tutkimus käytti kohteenaan Suomen Kestävän kehityksen toimikuntaa ja keskittyi tarkastelemaan sitä, kuinka Kestävän kehityksen toimikunnan tapainen valtion elin viestii yksityisen sektorin sidosryhmilleen ja kuinka yksityinen sektori puolestaan tulkitsee tämän viestinnän.

#### **Tutkimusmenetelmät**

Tutkimus on laadullinen case-tutkimus, jossa tutkimusaineisto kerättiin kahdellatoista puolistrukturoiduilla haastattelulla. Tutkimusta varten haastateltiin kahta henkilöä Kestävän kehityksen toimikunnan sihteeristöstä ja 10 yksityisen sektorin edustajaa.

#### **Tutkimustulokset**

Tämän tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että Kestävän kehityksen toimikunnan tulisi keskittyä sidosryhmäviestinnässään entistä enemmän avainviestiensä selkiinnyttämiseen, sekä niiden noudattamisesta saatuun käytännön lisäarvon korostamiseen firmoille. Tutkimuksessa korostui niin sanottujen strategisten välikäsien tai kolmanten osapuolten rooli toimikunnan uskottavuuden kehittämisessä sekä vuoropuhelun parantamisessa toimikunnan ja yksityisen sektorin välillä. Lisäksi tutkimus osoitti sidosryhmillä olevan vahva korrelaatio itse toimikunnan hallinnon selkeyden sekä sen tekemän viestinnän selkeyden välillä. Tutkimustyössä kävi myös ilmi, että toimikunta tasapainottelee sidosryhmiensä vaatimusten sekä julkisen sektorin odotusten välillä sen suhteen, millaista valtiolta päin tulevan viestinnän tulisi olla ja mitä sen tulisi korostaa..

**Avainsanat:** sidosryhmäviestintä, sidosryhmäteoria, kestävä kehitys, julkinen sektori, viestintä, G2B

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	7
1.1 Motivation for Thesis study .....	7
1.2 Objective and research questions of the study .....	8
1.3 Introducing the Case.....	10
1.3.1 Sustainability in Finland .....	10
1.3.2 About the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSO) .....	11
1.4 Structure of the Thesis study .....	14
1.5 Contribution to corporate communication .....	15
2. Literature review .....	16
2.1 Sustainable development in Finland.....	17
2.2 Strategic nature and evolution of government communication.....	20
2.3 Stakeholder dialogue in government communication .....	24
2.3.1 Comparing government communication and corporate communication .....	25
2.3.2 Communication between government and business .....	27
2.3.3 Importance of stakeholder approach .....	30
2.4 Summary of literature review .....	38
2.5 Analytical framework.....	41
3. Methodology.....	44
3.1 Research approach.....	44
3.1.1 Single case design .....	44
3.1.2 Semi-structured interviews .....	45
3.2 Data collection.....	46
3.2.1 Selection of interviewees .....	47
3.2.2 Interview structure and themes .....	48
3.2.3 Carrying out interviews.....	50
3.3 Data analysis.....	53
3.4 Lens of the researcher and trustworthiness of the study .....	54
4. Findings and discussion.....	57
4.1 Government stakeholder communication work on sustainable development .....	59

4.2	Stakeholder perceptions on government communications on sustainable development .....	68
5.	Recommendations.....	87
5.1	Recommendations for the creation of a communications plan for the FNCSD .....	87
6.	Conclusion .....	95
6.1	Research summary .....	95
6.2	Main findings .....	97
6.3	Limitations of the research .....	98
6.4	Suggestions for further research.....	99
REFERENCES.....		101

## **ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE STUDY**

<b>FNCSD</b>	The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development
<b>G2B</b>	Government to business
<b>National strategy</b>	The Finnish national strategy on sustainable development
<b>SD</b>	sustainable development

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 MOTIVATION FOR THE THESIS STUDY

What leaders communicate and how they communicate will affect the way in which people prioritize and organize, and mobilize themselves into action. In the organizational context, effective communication with stakeholders is a prerequisite to ensure that the aspired mobilization around and prioritization of an organization's specific project or goal takes place.

Regardless of the growing interest towards stakeholder communication around corporate social responsibility and sustainable development in business to customer (B2C) relationships (de Bussy and Kelly, 2009) it seems that the topic of government to business (G2B) stakeholder communication about the same subject matter has not gained the same salience in academic research. Nonetheless the issues presented by sustainable development are multifaceted and interlinked, which means that cooperation, collaboration and communication between *all* societal actors –governments and businesses in particular –needs to be more seamless.

Governments alone cannot fully determine the ecological, economic and social trade-offs involved in sustainable development as these types of complex value judgments require more participatory approaches to sustainable development – in other words, being able to engage relevant stakeholders through effective communication. Currently, there exist many different kinds of government communication activities and no standardized framework for their analysis, and evaluating the impact and patterns of use of government communication remains very challenging (Howlett, Craft and Zibrik, 2010). Additionally, there has been little research done on the spectrum of government communication (public diplomacy) initiatives that would display how exactly political entities communicate with their key stakeholders. Hence studying the intricate relationship between government and business, and more specifically the G2B stakeholder communication, in the context of sustainable development is an intriguing and extremely relevant research topic.

The research gap this particular study aims to contribute to is in further exploring the gray zone of government to business stakeholder communication and strengthening the understanding of how



government bodies carry out their communication work and how corporate stakeholders perceive this communication. Gaining a better overview of this intricate communicational relationship will shed light on crucial development points and contribute to forming better guidelines for improving government stakeholder communication work with corporate stakeholders – ultimately ensuring that the issues around which society mobilizes itself and the manner it does so will contribute to positively furthering efforts in sustainable development.

## **1.2 OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY**

The goal of the present Thesis study is to shed light on how stakeholder communication is practiced in the government to business (G2B) sector in Finland, and particularly how it is practiced in the context of sustainable development. Due to the lack of studies related to communication in G2B relationships with regards to sustainable development, the specific objective of this Thesis is to study how a government body works to communicate about sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders and how this communication is perceived by business stakeholders in Finland. The objective can be thus divided into two entities.

Firstly, the Thesis study aims at understanding how a government body works to communicate about sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders. An extensive and appropriate communication strategy plays an increasingly important role in any organization's success. In order to narrow the scope of the research, this study will focus on investigating the Case Entity's – the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD) – communication practices with the key stakeholder group of Finnish companies in the context of sustainable development. This study concentrates on exploring communication in this specific relationship between a government body and private sector stakeholders, aiming to understand how a government body –in this case the FNCSD – communicates about sustainable development and policy goals related to sustainable development to private stakeholders. As a means to better bridge academic research with practice, guidelines for the creation of a practical communication plan that could improve the stakeholder communication are proposed based on the findings of the study.

Secondly, this study aims to understand how private sector stakeholders perceive the communication on sustainable development by a government body. Before discussing how private sector stakeholders perceive this communication, it is essential to understand how they understand sustainable development and gain insight into what their relationship with it is. As there exist many different definitions of sustainable development, being able to understand how private sector stakeholders' in Finland perceive sustainable development helps the understanding of how they process information related to sustainable development and more importantly, the communication about the topic.

The research questions of the Thesis study are the following:

**RQ1: How does the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development work to communicate about the national strategy on sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders?**

**RQ2: How is the Finnish National Commission's communication about the national strategy perceived by corporate stakeholders?**

### **1.3 INTRODUCING THE CASE**

This subsection offers a brief overview of the context and case entity (the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD); its role, development and organizational structure.

It would be extremely challenging to study stakeholder communication in the government to business (G2B) relationship on a very general level as the communication is highly bound to the context within which it takes place, the organizational characteristics of the actors and sector specific factors affecting the communication. Hence this study has been limited to only cover a Finnish government body and the Finnish private sector, more specifically focusing on the activities of the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD) as a research premise. It should also be mentioned that this study was in part requested by the FNCSD and it should be underlined that the present research concentrates on FNCSD as a case organization and mainly aiming to analyze stakeholder communication at FNCSD and between its stakeholders.

#### ***1.3.1 SUSTAINABILITY IN FINLAND***

Finland's national strategy for sustainable development has been revised and a new national concept, Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development, has been launched. The national strategy on sustainable development goes by the name of "Finland we want 2050 – Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development". The proposal aims to "commit Finnish society in its entirety to sustainable development" and "create a new kind of operating culture, where sustainable development is seen as the basis of all operations" (Finnish Ministry of Environment, 09.07.2013). Finland's national strategy for sustainable development is linked to the European Union's assessment process and it is assessed every two years. The overall success and progress of sustainable development efforts is monitored by means of sustainable development indicators which are updated and developed by the national indicator network in cooperation with the FNCSD (OECD, 2006). This is done in order to maintain transparency and accountability in the strategy.

The commitment sets eight main goals / sustainability categories that look all the way to 2050 and aim to support the growth of a prosperous Finland achieved within the boundaries of nature's capacity. The goals aim to create a framework for real action and anyone can pledge their concrete commitment on

the website of the Ministry of the Environment (Finnish Ministry of Environment, 09.07.2013). These commitments and concrete actions from participating actors across society will then be monitored. The eight goals / sustainability categories are the following:

1. Equal prospects for well-being
2. A society of participatory citizens
3. Sustainable work
4. A carbon-neutral society
5. Consumption that accounts for nature's limited carrying capacity
6. Sustainable local communities
7. Resource-wise economy
8. Decision-making that respects nature

The Finnish national strategy on sustainable development represents a national view of the development of the Finnish society and has been jointly produced and approved by a wide range of societal actors (United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2013). The concept of the Finnish national strategy is additionally an internationally unique approach with regards to strategy implementation in the field of sustainable development as it comes in the form of a commitment which explicitly implicates involving all players of the Finnish society. The government body responsible for making sustainable development part of national policies and administrative practices is the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD), which will also be the case entity of this Thesis. The main challenge faced by FNCSD at the moment is infusing communications efforts in advancing the national strategy on sustainable development across the private sector.

### ***1.3.2 ABOUT THE FINNISH NATIONAL COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (FNCSD)***

Established in 1993, the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD) was one of the first in the world and its work aims to promote the implementation of sustainable development in Finland in accordance with the decisions made at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio in 1992. In 1998, the FNCSD's mandate was renewed and its term extended

to 2002 (Vuontisjärvi, 1998). Initially, the mandate of the FNCSD was 5 years in length and adjusted with the four-year Parliamentary election terms in order to ensure that the FNCSD's tasks were not too intertwined with the work of different Governments. Additionally this was to allow the FNCSD to take a longer-term approach to important issues in sustainable development (Finnish Ministry of Environment, 2008).

The mandate of the current FNCSD's chaired initially by the Minister of Finance Jutta Urpilainen was set from 2013 until the end of 2015. The adjustment of the length of the latest mandate of the FNCSD links to the new national strategy on sustainable development and the idea of this strategy as a societal commitment. One of the main reasons to this decision was to be able to evaluate how successful a more campaign-like approach would be in implementing the national strategy on sustainable development. Another reason to shorten the mandate of the FNCSD was to help it stay innovative and leave space for more flexible adjustments in its working practices - something the longer mandate did not support. As stated by the Deputy Secretary General of the FNCSD Marja Innanen, "5 years in such a rapidly changing world can be a very long time" (Interview, 15.04.2014)

The FNCSD is considered unique as it bases its activities on open dialogue carried out between the government, public administration, civil society, business and industry (United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2013). Nonetheless the legal status of the FNCSD is purely consultative. Upon the FNCSD's renewal in 1998, its goals were further developed and rewritten to reflect changing attitudes and to include other significant topics. The main goals were refined to focus on better connecting the work of the FNCSD to that of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (Vuontisjärvi, 1998).

Presently, the FNCSD's aims increasingly include linking the national sustainable development policies more seamlessly with the sustainable development work of the United Nations, the European Union and the regions (Finnish Ministry of Environment, 2008). Moreover, the FNCSD takes charge of promoting the development of indicators for sustainable development and other instruments which take into account socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development. These include intergenerational indicators such as government financial liabilities and preservation of biodiversity. The social impact of the national strategy, "Finland we want 2050 - Society's commitment to

sustainable development”, is monitored with, among others, a set of indicators that have been compiled under the Findicator-service. The Findicator-service was set up jointly between Statistics Finland and the Prime Minister’s Office and involved the collaboration of various experts with interests ranging from indicator development and information services to web publishing and statistical data (Findicator, 2014).

In practice the FNCSD strives to engage different societal actors to promote sustainable development policies in their own activities, to serve as a high-level sustainable development partnership network linking to the government and to successfully cooperate with other European sustainable development networks. The work of the Government and the FNCSD is guided by the new National Strategy for Sustainable Development, “Finland we want 2050 – Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development”, approved in December 2013 (Finnish Ministry of Environment, 2013).

The FNCSD consists of approximately 45 members representing the ministries, central governmental institutions, business and industry, regional and local authorities, trade unions, the scientific community, the educational sector, non-governmental organizations, the arts, and the church (United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2013-2014). A panel of scientific experts was established alongside the FNCSD to prepare, challenge and evaluate the work of the FNCSD and progress of the national strategy. The panel is hosted by Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra (Finnish Ministry of Environment - Kestävän kehityksen yhteiskuntasitoumus, 2014).

As can be seen from Figure 1, the meetings and agenda of the FNCSD are initially prepared and reported by the Secretariat of the FNCSD which is currently located in the Ministry of Environment. They are the main body driving the activities of the FNCSD and making sure that experts and appropriate ministries are included in the policy process. The approved working programme, its themes and meeting material are then passed on to the main body of the Commission which interacts with and engages different stakeholders ranging from trade unions to NGO’s and public administrators to municipalities.

Figure 1 below explains the organizational structure of Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development.



**Fig 1:** Organizational structure of the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2014)

## 1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS STUDY

The Thesis study is divided into 6 chapters. The present chapter introduced the research topic and the overall aim of this study. Additionally, this chapter covered the objectives and the research questions and introduced both the case company as well as the context in which the research takes place.

Chapter 2 presents the relevant literature on stakeholder communication, government communication, stakeholder theory and sustainable development, the focal points of this Thesis study. Chapter 3 outlines the research method and design of the work. Chapters 4 and 5 outline and discuss the findings of the study as well as its practical implications and finally, Chapter 6 concludes the Thesis study by summarizing the research and discussing main limitations of the study.

## **1.5 CONTRIBUTION TO CORPORATE COMMUNICATION**

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2009), communication plays an increasingly important role in any organization's value creation process and the communication function is relevant in the strategic management process in providing a link between the mission of an organization and its communication plans. This said, the current study contributes to the research area of corporate communication in the following ways:

Firstly, adopting a view that leans on corporate communication approaches in the governance and strategic management of stakeholders presents an opportunity to illustrate how corporate communication theory can not only be applied to, but also contribute to the value creation for a grander scope of organizations, such as those operating in the public sector. Ultimately, combining stakeholder communication theory from corporate communication with the governmental sector and the context of the cross-cutting theme of sustainable development is a fairly new approach.

Secondly, engaging in closer cooperation and improving communication with the private sector on the topic of sustainable development is an exercise that is not only faced by the Finnish government, but by governments across the globe (Melissen, 2007; de Bussy, 2010; Boulanger and Brechet, 2005; Carley and Christie, 1992). Companies on the other hand no longer operate only locally, but often have supply chains that span over national borders. This said, being able to draw on guidelines and best communication practices for governments that can be potentially scaled up and shared is an additional value brought by this study.



## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section will cover literature relevant to the Thesis study. Firstly, it is important to construct and understand the context of sustainable development within which the government to business (G2B) stakeholder communication happens, as well as what kind of characteristics arise from this environment that may affect the communication. These aspects are explored in section 2.1.

Section 2.2 aims to focus on the communicator - in this case the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSO) – and discusses the style, nature and potentially established practices that take place within the arena of government communication and aims to shed light on how they may have an affect the current communication of the FNCSO. Section 2.3 aims to extensively explore different dimensions of stakeholder dialogue in government communication by comparing government communication and corporate communication, looking into the communication taking place between the two parties and finally elaborating on the importance of stakeholder approach. In order to create an adequate framework through which to analyze and evaluate government communication with private sector stakeholders, section 2.4 aims to summarize the literature reviewed, bring together theories and propose an adequate analytical framework for the study.

Finally section 2.5 considers the lens of the researcher and possible biases that may have an effect on the Thesis study. Ultimately the goal of the literature review is to provide a comprehensive overview of the context and the different actors involved in the government to business stakeholder communication as well as the approach to the Thesis study at hand.

After each section, a proposition or propositions are derived from the literature. These propositions are then used to help in forming content for the interviews. This is done in order to better link the literature to the data collection and analysis and this approach is further explained in Chapter 3 (Methodology).

## 2.1 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN FINLAND

As the focus of this Thesis is on purely Finnish actors, the scope of defining sustainable development has been limited to exploring this concept mainly within the Finnish context. In light of this study, it is essential to understand what sustainable development stands for, what kind of role it has in Finland and how this has potentially affected the relationship between Finnish companies and sustainable development. Having an overview of how private sector stakeholders' in Finland perceive sustainable development supports the understanding of how they process information related to sustainable development and more importantly, the communication about the topic.

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A review of the literature that has emerged around the concept of sustainable development (SD) indicates a great lack of consistency in its interpretation. There is no consensus in academic literature as to what SD exhaustively stands for and although there have been many definitions published up to date, the term has since a long time been considered a “contested concept” (Jacobs, 1998). Nonetheless it can be said that SD is known worldwide as the development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1997).

The concept of sustainable development from 1980 to the present has evolved to incorporate definitions of three pillars of sustainability that cover environmental, social and economic sustainability – or, as coined by the motto at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 - “People, Planet, Prosperity” (UN, 2002). Today the meaning and the term itself have become so well-known and widespread that we might take it as common sense. Furthermore, it has become inevitably incorporated nearly all significant business, political or other strategic documents (Moldan et al., 2011): sustainable development is found, among other places, at the core of the priorities of the European Union (EU, 2007).

According to Berg and Hukkinen (2011) Finland has been one of the pioneering countries when it comes to developing national programmes for sustainable development: the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development was appointed in 1993 by the government of Finland and the

proposals for the first national programme aimed at promoting Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) were completed in 2005 by a committee speaking for a large group of stakeholders. Nonetheless, although Finland has been very active in accelerating sustainability strategies, promoting and communicating them impactfully are considered some of the most challenging fields to make progress in and proposals regarding sustainability programmes need to fight their way to the top of political prioritization (Berg and Hukkinen, 2011).

Sharachandra (1991) argues that sustainable development has and will truly become a key challenge for nations and the academic community's, political actors' and the media's debate display special interest in achieving SD as a primary goal and as a model of growth for nations. Pérez-Ortiz et al., (2014) elaborate further by stating that sustainability of the whole thus depends on reciprocity and mutual assistance and among different areas and parts of society and the role of government has been seen very central in steering societies and economies towards sustainable development. Nonetheless Laine (2005) underlines that although policies can demonstrate a desired direction of change, forces outside the policy area are also highly significant: companies, for instance, are vital agents of systemic change. Smith et al. (2005) point out that change in established systems in society rarely occur randomly, but are rather based on the types of innovations that are most likely to thrive in future socio-technical regimes that in turn might be influenced by sustainability policies.

According to Uphoff et al. (1998), in order to create a sustainable process of innovation and learning in society, businesses should be treated not as simple collaborators, but as “lead actors in the formal and informal research, trials and experimentation that can help orient them toward identifying and solving problems” (Uphoff et al., 1998 as cited in Mog, 2004). For Finnish entrepreneurs on the other hand, sustainable development is mainly about creating markets which initially tends to be an uphill struggle, especially for new and small companies. Nonetheless Heiskanen et al. (2011) suggest that by cooperating, smaller organizations are able to challenge existing structures. In this regard, Finland has an advantage as the country has a multitude of non-governmental organizations promoting specific causes as well as sustainable technological change (Laine, 2005).

Berg and Hukkinen (2011) point out that the Finnish model to advance sustainable development generally favors dialogue and horizontal coordination, and has a strong tendency of being very conflict

avoidant. Additionally, an evaluative study done on the perception of the Finnish Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) programme highlighted that the level of commitment towards the SCP programme varied greatly between participants: while part were motivated to improve the agenda, others were only interested in promoting certain proposals (Berg and Hukkinen, 2011). Laine (2005) affirms that these limitations help explain why Finnish policy programmes, like the national sustainable development strategy and the national programme to raise awareness of sustainable consumption and production (SCP) have not directly resulted in many specific outcomes, such as decreased material or energy use. As suggested by Carley and Christie (2000), sustainable development issues and management issues are fundamentally intertwined; ensuring sustainable development within a society is both a social and political process that should happen on all levels and supported by national policies. In line with Carley's and Christie's argumentation, Mog (2004) states that a broad-based community participation and buy-in is widely held as a fundamental element of the most powerful national SD programs.

Another reason for the limited outcomes in Finnish policy programmes in sustainable development can be attributed to a view of so-called weak sustainability, especially within the private sector (Laine, 2005). In weak sustainability, social and environmental problems are not perceived to be so severe: the issues are acknowledged, but, as pointed out by Hajer (1997), they are not considered to cause any fundamental problems to the continuum of human progress. It is thus assumed that society can solve any sustainability related crisis by "addressing it within the current social structures and economic institutions" (Hajer, 1997). In other words, no radical social shift is believed to be necessary and solutions are to be found through the development of existing practices, such as prevailing market mechanisms for instance. It has been found that Finnish listed companies employ the rhetoric of weak sustainability in their disclosures related to sustainable development, ultimately reinforcing the societal discourse of 'business can deliver sustainable development via business as usual' (Laine, 2005, p.399).

To conclude this section it can be said that although Finland has been one of the many pioneering countries to embrace SD and develop national programmes for SD in line with the goals derived from the UN, the success of these programmes have not gained the aspired salience. It can also be underlined that businesses should be engaged as key actors and leaders in government plans in order to create a strong basis for innovation and learning in society that supports SD. Nonetheless it should be noted that

for resolute engagement to happen, attention should be paid to the perception of the concept of sustainable development: although the concept has to present evolved to symbolize three main pillars of environmental, social and economic sustainability spanning across society, the concept remains undefined and the Finnish private sector continues to employ a rhetoric of weak sustainability.

**Derived proposition:** 1. Finnish companies approach commitment to sustainable development and communication about sustainable development with rhetoric of “weak” sustainability.

## **2.2 STRATEGIC NATURE AND EVOLUTION OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION**

The following section covers the nature of government communication and pinpoints main areas that have or are subject to change in this particular sector of communication. As one of the three aims of this study is to understand how a government body works when communicating to its corporate stakeholders, it is crucial to understand what government communication is, how it has developed and what kind of communication practices have been established in this realm.

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According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) government communication concerns both government institutions as well as public sector organizations and has become a large growth industry in various countries although the definition of this term still differs among authors, varying from associating it with all form of political activity to issues as specific as political advertising. Mostly viewed in terms of organized processes, Melissen (2007) points out that government communication comprises all formal activities - oral or written – that involve a single individual (interpersonal communication), a particular group of people or an undefined public of recipients (mass communication). As government actions can both prevent and promote information release, the meaning of the intricate term of “government communications” needs to be given more clarity.

Vedung and Doelen (1998) define government communications as the “*efforts to use the knowledge and data available to governments to influence public behavior in the direction consistent with government aims and wishes*” (p.103). Government communication activities have also often been

divided into two dimensions; the first dimension refers to activities aimed at altering the behavior of certain political, social and economic actors and the second dimension focuses on the different stages of the policy cycles that the communication practices impact (Howlett, Craft and Zibrik, 2010). Anholt (2003) considers government communication synonymously with the term of public diplomacy, and sees that the core of public diplomacy is in “strategically designing and disseminating information to targeted audiences” (p.25). Nowadays public diplomacy, or government communication, has become to be viewed as a means for a state to accumulate “soft power” via the communication of desirable images and reputation within audiences in the national and international arena (Fährnich 2013). A popular definition of public diplomacy by Hans N. Tuch (1990) has been given as follows:

*“a government’s process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented”* (Tuch, 1990).

Despite varying views in its definition, there has been wide agreement on the view of government communication as policy tool and a means to give effect to policy goals. Zaharna (2008) argues that public diplomacy (or government communication) is just as much “a communication phenomenon as a political one” (p.88).

Today, Feldman and Khademian (2007) suggest that overall governance has also begun a shift towards more collaborative and consultative modes of governance which has led to the rise of new communication practices in many administrations around the world. Wang (2006) builds on this by further elaborating that the credibility and effectiveness of government communication practices are also increasingly under challenge as a result of the rapidly changing global political and economic landscape, the expansion of communication and media technologies and the emergence of new players in global affairs. These developments have pushed forth new approaches such as branding and campaigning into the repertoire of communication instruments among governments (Fährnich 2013). With this backdrop, Howlett et al. (2010) argue that government communication has moved over time more towards communication efforts or campaigns that are “*goal-oriented attempts to inform, persuade or motivate behavior change...at the individual, organizational and community level*” (Howlett, Craft and Zibrik, 2010, p.18). Government communication tools have also for the most part shifted away from “treasure-based” ones to “nodality-based” ones: in other words, governmental tools for awareness

raising and communicating have morphed from simply allocating funds to initiatives supporting a certain policy agenda to more intricate, relationship based government information or communication campaigns (Howlett, Craft and Zibrik, 2010).

Fährich (2013) suggests that one way to approach government communication is that of strategic communication, that refers more to the organizational theory of communication: organizations can be seen as larger social systems which are affected by the activities of both their environment and their publics. Against this backdrop, strategic communications can be seen as a force to govern and adjust to these publics and environments. According to Hallahan et al (2007) strategic communication can be seen as the “purposeful use of an organization to fulfill its mission” (p.6). In other words, strategic communication in society can be interpreted as being able to leverage social interaction and to direct the outcome of these interactions in a certain direction as to fulfill specific goals of an organization. It can be thus assumed that actors such as ministries, governments and other organizations make use of strategic communications to pursue their organizational objectives both in a national and international scope (Fährich 2013).

Melissen (2007) points out that the strategic use of communications has been part of governments’ political purposes since World War I when communication was used for “professional image cultivation” (p.34) and today nearly every act of policy takes into account elements of strategic communication. Strategic communication is said to have three main fields of communication objectives: the dissemination of information and ideologies, relationship building and the creation of certain images (Fährich 2013; Zaharna, 2009). This activity entails tailoring and directing information to specific target audiences as to create a specific response. Another type of communication practice presently considered in the context of government communication by Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) includes tools such as branding and campaigning that have been transferred over from the area of marketing communication. Although previously regarded as a vulgarization of traditional government communication and diplomacy, both practices are “slowly but surely entering today’s diplomatic services” (Melissen, 2007, p.33) and they are more and more viewed as new instruments of government communication.

While strategic communications by states mainly draws attention to the senders and target groups of the communication activities, intermediary actors also play an important role: according to Riordan (2007) “governmental communication is often considered manipulative” and the greater visibility a central aim of government communication is the long-term oriented, broad exchange on all societal levels that aims to build “cultural bridges” and foster good relations amongst societal actors that can positively impact political relations national actor enjoys, the less credible their communication is regarded (Riordan, 2007, p.341). Intermediary actors can thus help in mitigating distrust, another aspect connected with governments as senders of communication. The field of intermediaries encompasses actors from organizations to individuals, including semi-governmental and independent organizations as well as civil society actors (Fähnrich 2013). Mueller (2009) implies that some of the main advantages of intermediary actors lies in their being perceived as independent as well as in their capacity to build person-to-person relationships – “a web of human connections that can later serve as the context for official dialogue and negotiations” (Mueller, 2009, p.105).

Today, with regards to intermediary actors in government communication, Melissen (2005) points out the role of so-called citizen diplomats who have also gained ground as a fundamental component of public diplomacy, and the direct interaction of citizen diplomats with target groups is seen as a great advantage and valuable asset with regards to enhancing the trustworthiness and effectiveness of governmental communication activities. As highlighted by Zaharna (2009), “communication channels that allow direct interaction, accord a sense of immediacy and facilitate involvement among the participants are favored over mass media channels” (Zaharna, 2009, p.92). According to Fähnrich (2013) This type of political face-to-face, interpersonal communication is seen to operate on two levels; the governmental level of people interaction that comprises of speeches, delegations or awards –also described as “media events” –and the people level of interaction which encompasses physical exchange programs in culture, education or sports aiming to bring into dialogue civil society actors from different nations.

Nonetheless while direct communication can be seen as advantageous in terms of trustworthiness, it remains limited with regards to the amount of people that can be addressed. Although seen as less authentic, mass media has expanded its role in government communication and diplomacy and it is seen as a source of soft power to political actors: political actors have the ability to influence both the



mass media agenda as well as the framing of reports (Fährnich 2013). The use of strategic media relations can be hence seen as core instruments of mass media communication and it is in the government's interest that political affairs on the public agenda are in line with its own political agenda.

To summarize this section, it is important to take note that government communications is a constantly evolving concept due to the rapidly changing global political and economic landscape and the expansion of communication and media technologies. Mostly viewed as organized processes, government communication is seen to have at its core the strategic design and dissemination of information to targeted publics. Governments also make use of strategic communication to pursue their organizational objectives and nearly every act of modern day government communication takes into account elements of strategic communication.

In view of this study, understanding the definition and nature of government communication is essential as it might have an effect on how communication and, ultimately, stakeholder communication is carried out in the government sector.

**Derived propositions:** 1. Government communication is a strategic tool to give effect to government strategy. 2. The credibility and trustworthiness of government communication is often questioned.

## **2.3 STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION**

In addition to defining government communication, it is as important to gain a better image of the environment in which it takes place. In the context of this Thesis, the most natural point of comparison to help shed light on the nature of the government communication environment is to appose it with that of corporate communication. Additionally, as a means to better bridge the academic research and practical implications of this Thesis, one of the three aims of this study is to look into how government to business stakeholder communication work can be improved. Hence it is essential to understand the concept and nature of stakeholder dialogue inherently linked to government communication. The following three subsections aim to cover the aforementioned topics.

### ***2.3.1 COMPARING GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATION***

Today, the perception of the role of government communication has moved from simply being a means to transfer information and convince receivers to becoming a genuine tool that government actors use to create meaning in political processes. Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) argue that government bodies are also facing more businesslike changes in their goals, functions, structures and norms.

Government organizations tend to be more directly subject to pressure from major stakeholder groups. Garnett (1992) sees that communication in the government sector is strongly affected by political rationalities and realities, such as changing political mandates for instance. He also states that communication processes are additionally complicated by the interference of mass media and the fact that government organizations usually need to communicate about a broad range of issues to very diverse target groups (Garnett 1992). Gelders, de Walle and Steven (2005) argue that as governmental actions influence a larger amount of people with considerable consequences, government communication is more challenging and more important than communication from companies.

The complexity of government communication is also present in the degree of openness and interpretation with regards to information; the characteristics of a policy intention are generally discussed up until they are decided upon, translating into high democratic involvement from publics. This type of public discussion about a product or service before it has been launched would be very uncommon to see taking place in the private sector. Furthermore the political product is generally more intangible and complicated - a stark contrast to the often homogeneously perceived characteristics of products on the consumer market (Gelders, Bouckaert, and van Ruler 2007). Where government organizations aim for societal effects within an economic context, companies have a tendency to maximize profits while taking into consideration societal constraints. Grunig and Jaatinen (1998) additionally stress that from a management perspective, government communication faces a more complex environment than corporate communication; several stakeholders are engaged in government communication and the impact of government communication is critical on society as a whole, both domestically and internationally.

As opposed to private sector communication management which focuses on creating favorable images, Gelders et al. (2007) emphasize that communication management in the government is more concerned with the continuity of political governance as well as “maintaining and strengthening political support” (Gelders, Bouckaert and van Ruler 2007, p. 333). While corporate organizations have historically embraced public relations and communication strategies and tactics, the public sector have undervalued the role of communication and bypassed public relation strategies. Although this devaluation has resulted in the removal of public relations and communications positions in the government, leaving inapt communicators to fill in the gap, Gelders et al. (2005) point out that recent research has shown that management in the public sector has increasingly come to understand the value of communications and public relations.

One significant factor impeding the creativity and openness of government communications is the external legal framework within which the government operates. Additionally, Liu et al. (2010) point out that due to financial and time constraints, government officials seldom release all information and usually wait for specific information to be requested from either the public or the media. It has also been argued that due to the media’s predisposition to cover government organizations more negatively than their private sector counterparts, government employees rather opt to follow the status quo in order to avoid any negative media coverage (Liu et al., 2010; Jones, 2002). This in turn can hinder any changes when it comes to improving government communication practices. The way governments communicate information reflects the manner in which they conduct democratic politics in the information age and the main challenge confronting modern day government communication is that of credibility. Gelders et al. (2005) add that this challenge is not helped by the fact that the public is frequently more sceptic about government communication despite the honest intent of the majority of messages (Gelders, de Walle and Steven, 2005).

Recently, government communication approaches have shown successful adaptation to the digital age with various forms of e-government arising and the internet being leveraged as an effective information dissemination tool. Research (Kang et al. 2102) has shown that public sector organizations and government alike are increasingly utilizing homepages, websites and even personified blogs in promoting the participation and two-way communication from firms and individuals alike. This type of two-way communication fosters enhanced mutual understanding of the other party’s needs and wants

resulting in a more collaborative relationship between public and private sector (Hood & Margetts 2007).

Although it has been found that the public sector environment “uniquely affects communication practices” (Liu et al., 2010, p.8), the main difference between the two sectors lies in financial constraints, as government communicators often have to adapt their communication activities to the scarce resources available. In this sense, the creative and judicious use of budgets continues to be important especially in the public sector (Pounsford and Meara 2004).

To sum up this section it can be said that government communication faces additional complexity as opposed to corporate communication in its need to take into account the requirement of open discussion and continuous democratic involvement from various publics. The key problems surrounding government communication seem to stem from issues of trustworthiness and credibility as well as what channel to communicate through it in order to minimize skepticism from publics. In addition, it can be said that trying to cater to multiple stakeholder expectations in the process of policy work has a great influence on the effectiveness of the communication process. With regards to this study, it is fundamental to not only define the concept of government communication, but also the issues affecting the actual communication practices in the public sector. Apposing government communication to corporate communication was done in order to highlight these practices and how they might contrast with those used in corporate communications. Understanding the complexity faced by government communicators is relevant in understanding their work behind their stakeholder communication.

**Derived proposition:** 1.The government communications environment is highly complex and inflexible.

### ***2.3.2 COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS***

Liu et al. (2010) emphasize that government communicators should take into account three distinct factors when collaborating with the private sector: 1) different legal frameworks 2) different primary publics and their information needs and 3) the impact of politics. Cross-sector collaboration may increase the amount of publics government communicators need to reach out to and furthermore expose

government communicators to corporate legal frameworks, which in turn would restrict their options in the creative messaging and information dissemination (Liu et al., 2010).

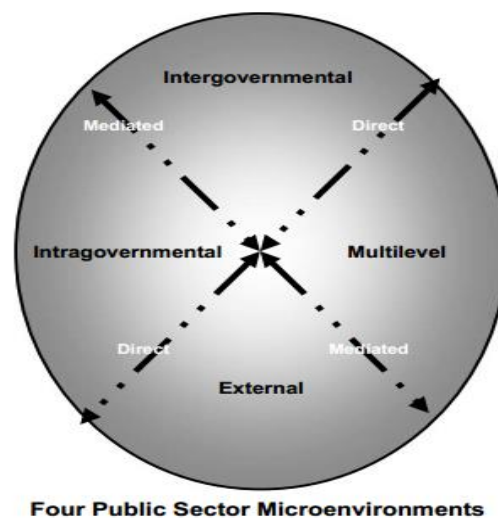
With regards to government to business interaction, well-managed communication has the capacity, for instance, of softening the more forceful nature of policy or regulations. Kang et al. 2012 affirm that companies might often remain somewhat suspicious of government communication as governments have the capacity of controlling information although this perception of government communication varies according to different industries. The company's level of exposure to government regulations additionally affects their perception of government communication: companies operating in heavily regulated industries are accustomed to restrictions and perceive them as an unavoidable industry trait which they understand how to react to and initiate communicate about in order to preserve their rights and offer opinions, whereas companies exposed to less policies and regulations would perceive communication about any such initiatives in a more extreme – positive or negative –manner (Kang et al. 2012). As the perceptions of government communication strategies vary from company to company, targeting and segmenting communication strategies for different firms by controlling the intensity, the method and the directivity of the communication strategy is essential.

Creating a business climate where firms can appropriately adapt and respond to changes in the external environment, national governments creatively design and use an array of public policies such as subsidies, embargoes and tariff quotas. Companies' reactions to these public policies are largely influenced by communication strategies. Previous work has also shown that communication strategies are a key prerequisite for executing public policy at the public level since their core functions consist of "motivating, persuading and information sharing" are central in overcoming reluctance and resistance to suggested changes (Kang et al. 2012, p.24). Nonetheless Gelders et al. (2005) affirm that exploration on the causal relationship between government communication strategies and firms' policy adoption and dissemination remains scarce.

Communication-research suggests that communication strategies should be managed through the four key features of direction, purpose, channel and ethics in order for them to be successful and persuasive (Gelders et al., 2005). Authors Kang et al. (2012) argue that in order to have a mutual understanding

with firms, government should focus on two-way communication and aim to collaborate directly with companies in order to achieve their buy-in.

Liu and Horsley (2010) have proposed a government communication decision wheel as a basis for communicational decision making in the public sector as traditional public relations models and theories do not fit the unique characteristics of the public sector appropriately. The model incorporates the unique environmental attributes of the public sector by specifying four distinct microenvironments within which all public sector communicators can operate in: multilevel, intragovernmental, intergovernmental and external (Liu et al., 2010).



**Fig 2.** Government communication decision wheel (Liu et al., 2010, p.195)

The government communication decision wheel (Figure 2) assigns nine primary environmental attributes for all four microenvironments that influence which channels (unmediated or mediated) and strategies of dissemination government communicators select. These attributes affect the microenvironments very differently (Table 1) and can be divided into two categories: (1) influences on the daily activities (media scrutiny, federalism, legal frameworks, public good, politics and poor public perception) and (2) influences on professional development opportunities (devaluation of leadership opportunities and communication). Some of the attributes stand out more in certain microenvironments

(e.g., politics in the multilevel and intergovernment environments) and others are common to all four microenvironments (e.g. legal constraints).

Environmental attributes	Proposed impacts within the microenvironments			
	Multilevel	Intergovernmental	Intragovernmental	External
<b>Factors that impact daily activities</b>				
Politics	High	High	Moderate	Moderate
Public good	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Legal frameworks	High	High	High	High
Media scrutiny	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Poor public perception	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Federalism	High	High	High	High

**Table 1.** Effect of Government Communication Decision Wheel Attributes on Microenvironments  
(Liu et al., 2010, p.196)

In this Thesis study, the FNCSD can be situated in the external microenvironment where “any level of government coordinates with private and/or nonprofit organizations, both domestically and/or internationally” (Liu et al., 2010, p.209). As can be derived from Table 1, the factors that have the greatest impact on the daily activities of actors operating in the external microenvironment are legal frameworks, federalism, politics, media scrutiny and poor public perception.

To conclude this subsection, it is crucial to understand the interaction in the G2B sphere and the work that goes behind government communication with the private sector as it is at the core of this study.

**Derived proposition:** 1. Perceptions of government communications vary from company to company  
2. Governments should target and segment communication strategies for different companies.

### ***2.3.3 IMPORTANCE OF STAKEHOLDER APPROACH***

Ever since the publication of Edward Freeman’s book “Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach” (Freeman, 1984) more than two decades ago, the stakeholder concept has been a prominent theme in management literature. Yet despite the vocabulary of stake holding becoming more common

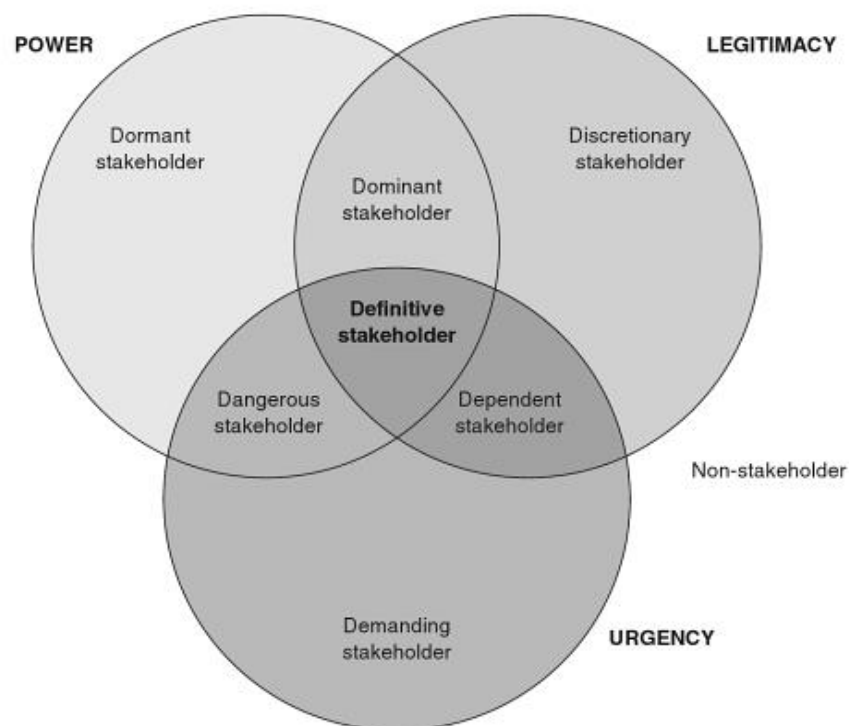
amid leaders in business and politics, the concept remains disputable and poorly defined (de Bussy and Kelly, 2010). One of the main weaknesses and limitations seen in stakeholder theory is the fact that it applies exclusively to corporations and stakeholder theorists have given little attention to other organizational entities, such as governmental organizations (de Bussy and Kelly, 2010).

Stakeholders can be defined as “any group or individual who can affect or who is affected” by an organization’s plans (Freeman, 1984, p.46) Another yet similar view is offered by Khan and Gerrard who define stakeholders as “organizations and individuals with an interest in a particular project” which can include “public agencies at all levels, landowners, industry and commerce, special interest groups, customers, potential customers, community leaders and the community in general” (Khan and Gerrard, 2005, p.191). Fraedrich et al. (2011) underline that a unifying feature for these groups is that while they are influenced by an organization, they also have the ability to influence the organization. Hence the organization-stakeholder relationship should be considered as a two-way communication process (Fraedrich et al., 2011).

Theoretically, the adoption of the stakeholder view marks a shift away from the neo-classical economic theory of organizations to a more socio-economic theory within which the stakeholder perspective is entrenched (Cornelissen, 2008). As opposed to the neo-classical economic theory which suggests that the sole purpose of the organization is to “make profits in their accountability to themselves and their shareholders” the socio-economic theory argues that accountability stretches to other groups outside shareholders who are “important for the continuity of the organization and the welfare of society” (Cornelissen, 2008). Against this backdrop, organizational activities and goals should thus be found legitimate and valued by all parties or stakeholders in the social system. The “stakeholder” has in recent years also entered the lexicon of public relations as a synonym for the expression of “publics” (de Bussy and Kelly, 2010). Grunig and Repper (1992) draw a subtle differentiation of the two terms by proposing the term “stakeholder” as a starting point in the creation of a “stakeholder map as the essential first step in the strategic management of publics” and stress the necessity of identifying “active” publics from these stakeholders (Grunig and Repper, 1992, p.128). Simply put, seeing publics as segmented subsets of stakeholder groups.



As stakeholders vary in behavior and attribute, it would be a mistake to presume that all stakeholders can be treated equally (Freeman, 1984). Coleblatch (2006) states that the degree to which managers prioritize stakeholders is defined by the three stakeholder attributes of legitimacy, power and urgency that are perceived to be possessed by the stakeholders. The power in a stakeholder relationship is defined as the extent to which a stakeholder or stakeholder group is able to have or gain access to utilitarian, normative or coercive means to impose its will (de Bussy and Kelly, 2010). An example of normative social power in a political context would be the ability of stakeholders or stakeholder groups to leverage the attention of the media to support a certain cause for instance. Urgency on the other hand is seen as the “degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate action” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p.864). Legitimacy in stakeholder classification refers to the claim laid upon the organization by the stakeholder group (Cornelissen, 2008). As shown in the stakeholder salience model by Cornelissen (2008) in Figure 3, the three attributes together form seven different types of stakeholders, which are prioritized and classified according to the absence or presence of these three attributes (power, urgency, legitimacy)



**Fig 3.** Stakeholder salience model (Cornelissen, 2008)

The central idea in the stakeholder salience model is that the more salient the stakeholder is deemed for the organization, the higher their priority and the higher the need for active communication with them should be. Less salient stakeholders are seen to have less priority and hence the need for ongoing communication is much lower (Cornelissen, 2008). As can be seen in Figure 3, the most powerful stakeholder is the definitive stakeholder, as they possess all three attributes over an organization: legitimacy, urgency and power. In other words, the definitive stakeholder is both legitimate and powerful and thus requires the highest priority as well as continuous communication (Cornelissen, 2008).

Most definitions in academic literature tend to stress the power dependencies and legitimacy of stakeholder-firm relationships: scholars aiming to narrow the definition emphasize the legitimacy whereas broader definitions often focus on the stakeholder's power to "influence the firm regardless of their legitimacy" (O'Higgins and Morgan, 2006, p.64). Cornelissen (2008) states that the notion of having a legitimate stake in an organization is "inclusive" and can range from moral to economic interests and from "formal, binding relationships as the basis of stake holding to more diffuse and loose ties with the organization" (Cornelissen, 2008, p.43). This notion of "inclusiveness" suggested by Cornelissen entails organizations ideally communicating and engaging with all of their stakeholders: in today's stakeholder communication management, Clutterbuck and Scholes (1998) also argue that it is no longer about selecting and prioritizing a stakeholder group to communicate to, but about how to manage communication across multiple stakeholder groups.

The success of any organizational strategy is to a great extent dependent on activating stakeholder cooperation (Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins, 2014) and failure to involve stakeholders especially in development initiatives can slow down the achievement of organizational objectives (Frooman, 1999). This has led to more and more focus being placed on shifting the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders from "'management' to 'collaboration' and from 'exchange' to 'long-term relationships'" as opposed to simple instances of communication (Cornelissen, 2008, p.53). One popular view on stakeholder involvement or participation is that if "people are involved, they are more likely to support a new development" (Helin et al., 2013, p.211). Cooperation between an organization and its stakeholders for a particular issue or problem "enables stakeholders to engage in an interactive process to make necessary decisions" (Jamal & Getz, 1995, p.190) – a process of joint decision making

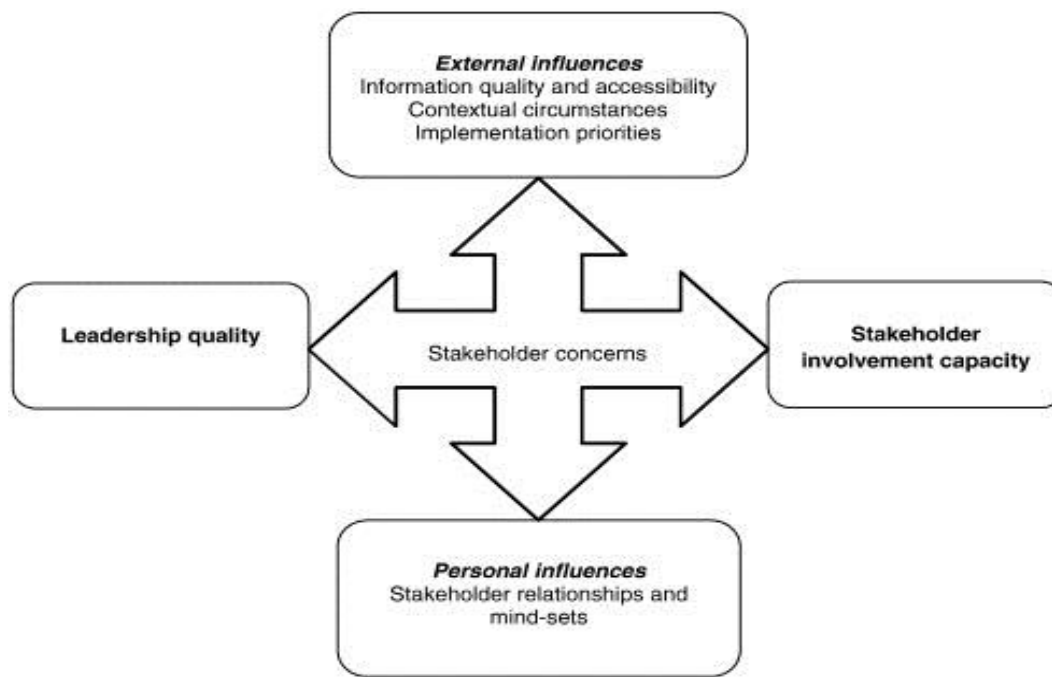
that has been applauded as a fruitful means of building mutual advantage and vision. Competitive advantage and performance have been tightly linked with the quality of organization-stakeholder relationships: ultimately empowering and consulting stakeholders in decision-making – especially in sustainability issues – will enable them to better understand the perceived impacts of decisions made by organizations and to gain their support (Ioannides 1995).

As stakeholder engagement tends to often be issue-specific, managers should consistently and continually evaluate stakeholder potential for collaboration and develop strategies to enhance or alter relationships with key stakeholders. Since organizations create the circumstances that either complicate or facilitate the value-creation process to which stakeholders are linked to, Helin et al. (2013) highlight that leadership quality plays a very important role. The value created by an organization can be seen as the “total value created in each of its stakeholder relationships” (Bosse, Philips and Harrison, 2009, p.451). Depending on what models of categorization an organization applies, it can plan its communication strategies to its stakeholders. Based on their stakeholder analysis, organizations are able to better determine how intensively they must communicate with specific stakeholder groups and what should the key messages be (Cornelissen, 2008). In addition, Cornelissen (2008) argues that stakeholder categorization provides organizations with insight as to whether stakeholders need to be actively listened to and communicated with, or if the organization should simply disseminate information about themselves and their activities.

In the political arena of government communication, the concept of stake holding is in widespread use and it is seen to refer primarily to “those with a legitimate interest or claim in a particular situation or policy decision” (de Bussy and Kelly, 2010, p.301). The question of stakeholder breadth has been debated by writers in the field of policy development who argue that the key challenge with regards to stakeholders in the governmental sphere is the identification of “who should be involved in the process of policy formulation and implementation” and who should not (Coleblatch, 2006, p.16). One of the main challenges in policy work is in the negotiation among conflicting perspectives with the aim of creating outcomes which an adequate number of stakeholders can support. Nonetheless, stakeholders are also seen to have obligations and the concept of stakeholder does not create further duties for managers and leaders (Mitchell et al, 1997). Additionally if self-appointed stakeholders –groups who demand a say in an issue – want to benefit of affecting a decision-making process, they are also from

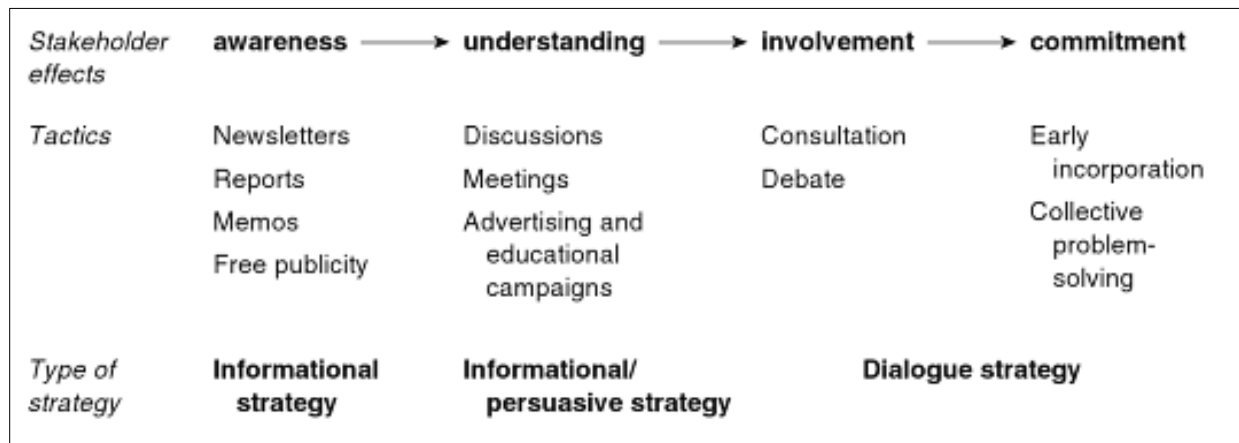
their side obligated to participate responsibly in that process (O'Higgins and Morgan, 2006). The challenge in the political sphere is thus striking a balance between stakeholder groups whose active communication behavior cannot be ignored, and the stakeholders with legitimate interests who should not be ignored, as these two groups are not always automatically one and the same.

In the realm of government communication, it has additionally been observed by Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins (2014) that good quality information and accessibility to that information “increased stakeholder awareness, activity and understanding of goals” (p.1348) The majority of contemporary academic literature tends to focus on addressing named groups of stakeholders as opposed to strategies on how to deal with underlying stakeholder interests. Collaboration between organizations and stakeholders may be complex due to the diversity of stakeholders who often hold very contrasting viewpoints, which in turn further evokes the need for engaging, effective stakeholder dialogue. Waligo et al. (2014) suggest evaluating and exploring stakeholder engagement through the Leadership-Stakeholder Involvement Capacity (LSIC) nexus framework: the LSIC nexus is a “simplified representation of the relationship between leadership quality and stakeholder involvement capacity and its influence on stakeholder involvement in developmental initiatives” (Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins 2014). The LSIC nexus (Figure 4) presented by Waligo et al (2014) highlights the important role of leadership as well as its relationships with and responsibility towards stakeholders that are vital for the successful implementation of organizational goals. Addressing stakeholder concerns is key to stakeholder involvement and dialogue especially in developmental initiatives that tend to be often very complex. The LSIC nexus argues for strong leadership qualities such as trustworthiness, accessibility, effective communication and resilience that enhance stakeholder involvement capacity and the achievement of the strategic objectives of an organization (Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins 2014).



**Fig 4.** The Leadership-Stakeholder Involvement Capacity (LSIC) nexus (Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins, 2014, p.1348).

In line with this, authors de Bussy and Kelly (2010) argue that managing stakeholder relationships should be at the core of organizational communication “whether in business, politics or other organizational settings” (p.302). According to Cornelissen (2008), once an organization’s stakeholder relationships are defined, communication practitioners can plan communication strategies that will appropriately deal with each stakeholder. The use of these strategies will then be influenced by the need for active engagement with stakeholders to provide them with possibilities to connect with the organization and to build long-term relationships with them (Cornelissen, 2008). Stakeholder communication strategies can be roughly divided into three; they can simply disseminate information (informational strategy/one-way symmetrical model of communication), aim to persuade (persuasive strategy/two-way asymmetrical model of communication) or strive to engage stakeholders into dialogue (dialogue strategy/two-way symmetrical model of communication) (Cornelissen, 2008). The use of different strategies will ultimately depend on the perceived salience of the specific stakeholder (Cornelissen, 2008). It should be nonetheless noted that Cornelissen (2008) discusses the different strategies on a fairly general level and they are not placed in any specific context, such as sustainable development for instance.



**Table 2.** Stakeholder communication: from awareness to commitment (Cornelissen, 2008).

Prominent public communication scholar J. Grunig has noted that the symmetrical (one-way) model of public communication is currently the most frequently used model among government communication practitioners and that the idea of the dialogic, two-communication and relationship management should be promoted as a viable alternative (Grunig and Jaatinen, 1998). Melissen's commonly cited description of the new public diplomacy (or government communication) also holds the assumption of relationships equivalent with communication: government communication is no longer confined to simply messaging, promotion campaigns, or direct governmental contacts with publics serving policy purposes. It is rather very much about building relationships with private and civil society actors as well as facilitating networks between different non-governmental parties (Melissen, 2005). Zaharna supports this view by arguing that relationships are "the pivotal, central feature in government communication" (Zaharna, 2009, p.87).

To conclude this section, it is relevant for the present study to define stakeholder dialogue in government communication as the goal is to understand how a government body communicates with their stakeholder. Understanding the models by Waligo et al. (2014) and Cornelissen (2008) are therefore highly relevant in the present study as they identified important aspects relating to both the stakeholder and the communication strategies to appropriately deal with each stakeholder.

**Derived propositions:** 1. Government bodies should focus on two-way communication with stakeholders. 2. If stakeholders are involved by the government body, they are more likely to support

the proposed strategy. **3.** Leadership in the government body affects stakeholders' perception of the communication.

## **2.4 SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section aims to emphasize some of the main points of the reviewed literature with regards to government communication and point out theories that can be used to create frameworks for the analysis and evaluation of government to business stakeholder communication.

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Although there exists significant amount of literature covering operational differences of the private and public sector (Gelders, Bouckaert, van Ruler 2007), very few researchers have focused on the implications on communication within these contexts. Scholars researching communication practices in the public sector (Liu et al., 2010) have identified nine attributes that differentiate the public sector communication environment from the private sector: value of communication, leadership opportunities, federalism, media scrutiny, legal frameworks, politics, professional development, public perception and public good.

As pointed out in the literature review, government communication has become more focused on the opinion of strategic publics, who have the capacity to affect the communication either positively or negatively. As there exist many different kinds of government communication activities and no standardized framework for their analysis, Howlett et al (2010) point out that evaluating the impact and patterns of use of government communication remains very challenging. Additionally, there has been little research done on the spectrum of government communication (public diplomacy) initiatives that would display how exactly political entities communicate with key publics.

One method of public diplomacy analysis is proposed by Zaharna (2009), who suggests to look at political and government communication by combining an informational framework and a relational framework of communication: the information framework explores the design and dissemination of messages in advancing political objectives while the relational framework aims to unveil the process of constructing and building social structures and relationships to advance political objectives.

Given the objectives and nature of public diplomacy, there are several key features that a political communicator needs to consider of which the first feature, the messaging strategy, relates to the informational framework of public diplomacy analysis: Zaharna (2010) argues that in order to achieve a desired effect, there needs to be a well-formulated message accompanied by a strategic selection, structuring, and presentation of the information. This in turn requires achieving control over the message – of its design, consistency and integrity – which the communicator is able to hold over time and over different platforms. Moreover, Zaharna (2010) underlines the importance of making the difference between the “political sponsor” of the communication initiative and the general public, which is defined as the “target audience” and which plays a passive role – if any – in the preparation or implementation of the initiative, ending in ultimately a one-way flow of communication (p.148). The last main feature of the informational framework is the attempt to measure the effectiveness of the information initiatives through means such as audience reach and attitude as well as the quantification of information output. The basis of these features is the integral issues of credibility which essentially determines the persuasive value of any informational initiative. Examples of informational communication strategies can extend from vigorous advocacy (e.g. nation branding, media relations), to forceful information dissemination (e.g. propaganda), to efforts of “disseminating unbiased information”, such as broadcasts for instance (Zaharna, 2010, p.141).

As opposed to the informational framework, the relational framework suggested by Zaharna (2010) primarily focuses on “relationship-building and maintenance of social structures to solve communication problems to advance political objectives” (Zaharna, 2010, p.146). Central to the relational model is the objective of being the establishment and driver of a relationship – balancing levels of trust and risk – which in turn provides the social context of mutuality, connection and interdependence, and ultimately enhances the ability of all participating actors to attain their goals. Zaharna (2009) states that the ideal medium in the relational framework is that of interpersonal communication as its personal nature improves trustworthiness and makes it most effective for building and maintaining relationships. In addition, as it rejects the purely transmissional mode of communication, the relational framework relies on the dissemination of information via a network of a myriad of active participants. This type of approach on the other hand calls for a message that



resonates with the social context of that specific network and increases cohesion within it (Zaharna, 2010).

One of the main features of the relational framework is the identification and creation of critical relationships, removing any causes for strained connections and expanding the existing constructive ones. Strong relationship-building happens in contexts where mutual interests are emphasized and the focus is on actions and symbolic gestures displaying trust, reciprocity and commitment. Zaharna (2009) underlines that this requires an emphasis on active participation as well as a view of communication as a process where participants develop connections and coordinate actions stretching across all levels of society, as opposed to viewing communication as simply a product. With regards to channels of communication, the relational framework begins with interpersonal links facilitating direct interaction and steadily expanding to involve more participants. In other words, communication from prominent political leaders for instance should be seen as means to reinforce a relationship instead of regarding it purely in terms of information transmission.

Finally, it is essential to focus on the sustainability and continuity of the relationship to ensure its durability over time and exhibit interaction, long-term links and expansion of cooperation. Some examples of strategic communication within the relational framework include for instance various multilateral and bilateral cooperation projects and organizations (Zaharna, 2009). Nevertheless due to its nature, the relational framework is difficult to measure and quantify, and considering the “result-driven” element of policy-making and its prioritization of short-term goals, this approach – by itself – is frequently seen as limited especially in international affairs (Zaharna, 2010,p.126).

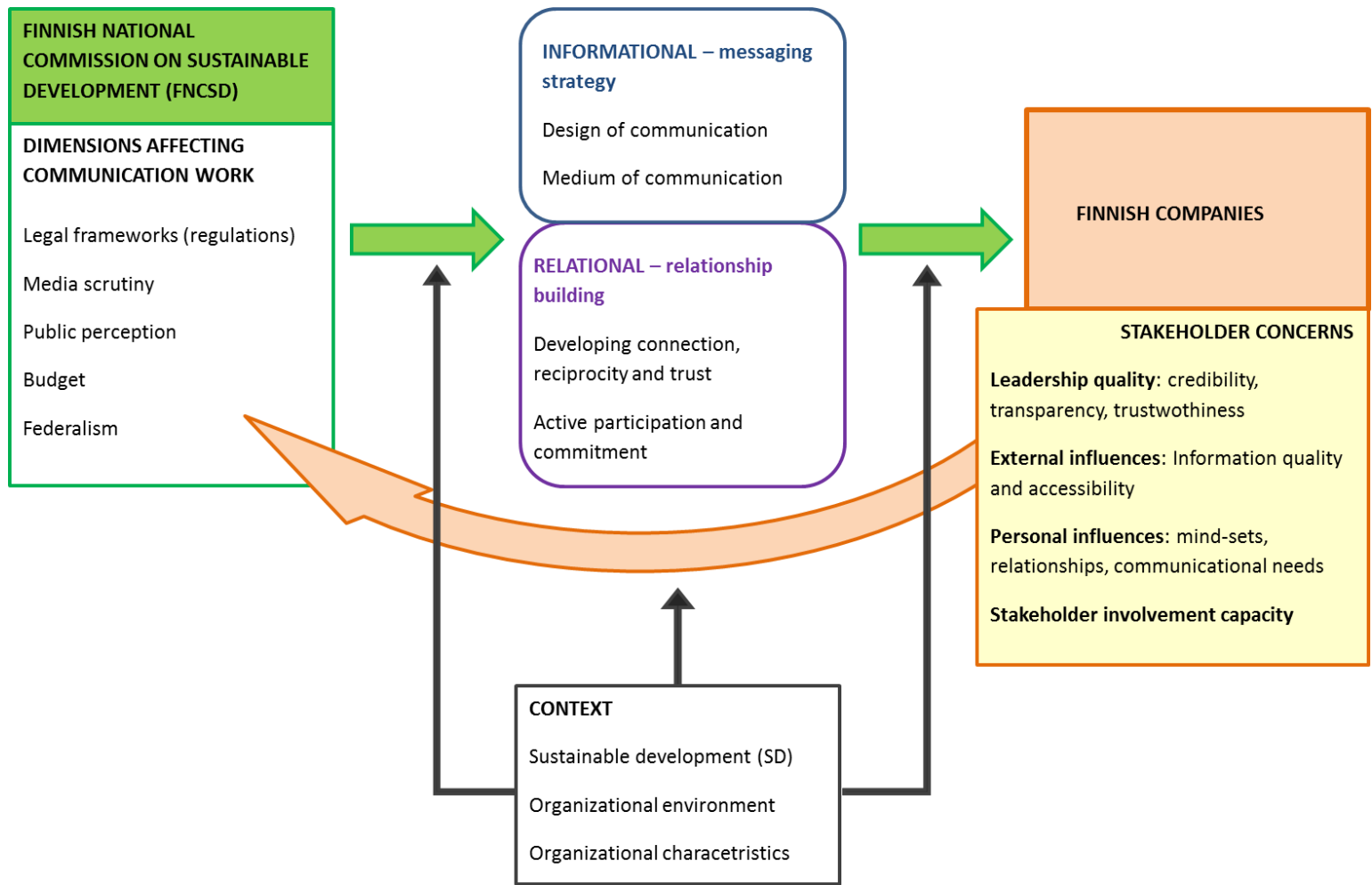
In summary, in order to be able to successfully analyze governmental communication, both frameworks should be applied together, since they have mutually supporting and reinforcing components that have the ability to improve the effectiveness of the government communication strategy.

## **2.5 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

The analytical framework for the present study is based on the literature discussed throughout Chapter 2 concerning sustainable development in Finland, the nature of government communication, stakeholder dialogue in government communication, the government-business relationship as well as the informational and relational frameworks applied to policy work and communication.

The framework emphasizes government stakeholder communication, as the overall objective of the present study is to explore how stakeholder communication is practiced in the government to business (G2B) sector in Finland in the context of sustainable development. The framework serves to help in organizing data and findings on how a government body works to communicate about sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders and how this government body's communication about sustainable development is perceived by private sector stakeholders in Finland.

The analytical framework for the present study is strongly influenced by Leadership-Stakeholder Involvement Capacity (LSIC) nexus framework by Waligo et al. (2014), the government communication decision wheel by Liu et al. (2010), as well as the informational and relational frameworks for communication proposed by Zaharna (2010) for public diplomacy analysis.



**Fig 5.** The Analytical Framework

As Figure 5 shows, the context and the factors (e.g. dimensions at the FNCSD and stakeholder concerns) affecting the communication work and the perception of the communication are highly emphasized in the communication process. As the focus of the present study is on the government to business stakeholder communication and relationship, the FNCSD and the Finnish companies form the key end points between which the possible stakeholder communication takes place. As discussed in section 2.3., the nature of the communicational relationship between a government body and companies is characterized by a varying range of perceptions from companies towards government communication, represented by the arrow moving from the Finnish companies to the FNCSD. The main factors affecting these perceptions – leadership quality, external influences, personal influences and involvement capacity - have been highlighted in the box depicting “Stakeholder concerns” and derived from Waligo et al.’s (2014) Leadership Stakeholder Involvement Capacity (LSIC) nexus.

The most central part of the framework is the actual process of stakeholder communication between the FNCS and the Finnish companies which is visualized by the two square boxes between the parties representing the informational and relational dimensions of the communication between the two parties. Based on the reviewed literature, it is important to examine both the structural aspects of the communication and the development of connection through participation and commitment while keeping in mind that these two are interdependent. These two dimensions have been derived directly from Zaharna's (2009) informational and relational frameworks suggested for analyzing government communication.

Because the study focuses on studying how stakeholder communication is done in the context of sustainable development, the context of sustainable development has been given a prominent position in the framework and it has been linked to all acts of communication taking place between the two parties.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents and justifies the methodological choices for the present study. The chapter is divided in 4 sections. Section 3.1 discusses the research method and approach and justifies why the particular method was chosen. Section 3.2 presents the data collection and section 3.3 discusses the actual data analysis. Finally section 3.4 closes Chapter 3 by discussing the trustworthiness of this study.

#### **3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH**

Silverman defines methodology as a general approach to studying a research topic and emphasizes that the method chosen should be selected based on the study at hand (Silverman, 2010). In other words, it can be said that there exist no wrong or right methods but more and less suitable ones concerning the research. As the objective of the present study is to explore government to business stakeholder communication practices in the context of sustainable development, a qualitative research approach was adopted.

Creswell (2007 p.19) describes qualitative research as merging and inductive: in other words it leans more on a bottom up approach and instead of being fully derived from theory, qualitative research can be seen as inductive, where new information is added and included in the research during the whole research process. The focus of qualitative research is more on in-depth understanding through careful analysis of actions, words, and records as opposed to quantitative research which looks at the quantification of these factors (Bryman and Bell, 2009). Based on the view of Bryman and Bell (2009) qualitative research can be thus seen to address the question of “how” while quantitative research centers more around the question of “how many”. With regards to this study, qualitative research methods can be considered to offer a better approach than the quantitative ones as I am concentrating on questions such as “why”, “what” and “how”.

##### ***3.1.1 SINGLE CASE DESIGN***

The aim of a research design is to make sure that evidence obtained during the research will enable us to answer the initial research questions as clearly and as unambiguously as possible (Bryman and Bell, 2009). A case study aims to “acquire knowledge [...] from intensive exploration of a single case”

(Becker, 1970, p. 75). A case study approach allows researchers to maintain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events - such as group behavior, managerial and organizational processes and international relations, among others (Yin, 2009).

*“The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result.”* (Schramm as cited by Yin, 2009)

As cited by Yin (2009) a case study is centered on producing deep and valuable understandings of the case(s) focused on, possibly resulting in new knowledge. Nonetheless there has been criticism on the limitations of a single case study as a research method, as it does not leave room for generalizations (Yin, 2009). In this regard, the aim of this Thesis is not to use the single case as a single generalizable "sample", but rather as a point to expand on existing knowledge that links to it.

A case study as an approach was chosen to provide better context for the exploration of a phenomenon – in this case the issue of government stakeholder communication within the context of sustainable development. This approach was considered most suitable for this study as it aims at both a thorough analysis of the investigated case and the development of more general rules and implications (Fidel, 1984). Additionally, approaching the research problem with a case study seems the most natural choice for this Thesis as the goal of the empirical part is to understand a single organization’s communication practices. As a researcher, I also see that using a case study will help in bridging the gap between abstract research and practice outside the theoretical world. In conclusion, without undermining the challenges presented by a case study, it can be regarded as an appropriate approach with fairly limited resources.

### **3.1.2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

Bryman and Bell (2003) suggest that most qualitative researchers try to see through the eyes of the research participants. This is why I chose to interview key stakeholders –in this case major Finnish companies –in order to understand the FNCSD’s current communicational situation and gain insights of the stakeholder’s opinions and needs.

The data collection used in this Thesis was informal semi-structured interviews that were organized around the main themes linking to this Thesis: sustainable development and actions related to it, government communication and stakeholder relationships. As the goal was not to have a pure question and answer session but rather a conversation of the interviewees' experiences of a phenomenon (Thompson et al. 1989), in this case the FNCSD's communication, semi-structured interviews were considered the most suitable data collection method. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011) point out that interviews are ideal for researching deeper meanings and highlighting people's subjective role in the research (p. 35). The purpose of interviews was indeed to prompt interviewees to share their own experiences and to bring out their "thoughts, perceptions and feelings" (Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2011, p. 41).

Additionally Meade (2010) suggests that the first step in developing a strategic plan for communication is to examine the present state of the communication. Thus, for this Thesis, semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate information collection methods as the aim is to study the current state of communication and based on this knowledge create further guidelines for improving the FNCSD's stakeholder communication practices with Finnish companies.

### **3.2 DATA COLLECTION**

The research data for this study comprises of semi-structured thematic interviews conducted with identified key stakeholders. The interviews were carried out with two groups for different purposes: the first group, the Secretariat of the FNCSD, was interviewed to gain an understanding of the work going behind the stakeholder communication and to pinpoint perceived "weak" points in the communication that could be further explored in the interviews with companies. The second group consisted of the main stakeholders in this Thesis study, in other words the representatives of Finnish companies. The second group was interviewed to gain more insight on the perceptions and needs the companies have regarding the FNCSD's stakeholder communication around sustainable development.

The interviews with both the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General of the FNCSD were carried out prior to interviewing stakeholders in order to gain an understanding of the views of the FNCSD with regards to its communication with stakeholders as well as their perceived challenges in

engaging stakeholders to commit to the national strategy on sustainable development. These two interviews proved to be very valuable in helping to structure and pinpoint issues to emphasize in the final semi-structured interviews conducted with the Finnish companies.

The following section will go on to explain in more depth the data collection; how interviewees were selected, where interviews were held and how the interviews were structured.

### ***3.2.1 SELECTION OF INTERVIEWEES***

As the research required insights to both the perceptions of the stakeholder communication of the FNCSD as well as to the work going behind this communication, the first group of interviewees was naturally the permanent members of the Secretariat of the FNCSD in charge of the communication: the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General of the FNCSD.

The interviewee candidates among Finnish companies on the other hand were chosen carefully according to the recommendations gained from the Deputy Secretary General of the FNCSD. Nonetheless the precondition for being a suitable candidate for this research required the candidates to be affiliated with a Finnish company. Ideally the interviews would provide the best possible representation of the different communicational perceptions of Finnish companies with regards to the stakeholder communication of the FNCSD and the national strategy on sustainable development. In order to gain the most holistic view possible of these perceptions, four categories from which interviewees were scoped were created as follows:

1. Finnish companies who have not committed to the national strategy on sustainable development
2. Finnish companies who have committed to the national strategy after being convinced to do so by the FNCSD
3. Finnish companies who have committed to the national strategy by their own will
4. Finnish companies who are not familiar with the national strategy or the FNCSD



As the scope of this Thesis and the resources available are limited, the number of interviewees was based on recommendations of both the Thesis supervisor and the Deputy Secretary General of the FNCSD as well as on the availability of the interview candidates.

### **3.2.2 *INTERVIEW STRUCTURE AND THEMES***

The overall themes of the interviews was companies' perceptions of the FNCSD's communication regarding sustainable development and the work going behind this communication, and three subthemes were selected based on both the reviewed literature and the two interviews conducted with the Secretariat of the FNCSD to make sure that the themes was approached as thoroughly as possibly.

The themes for the interviews were chosen based on the objectives of the Thesis study. In attempt to best link interviews to research questions and the propositions derived from the reviewed literature, three themes were created based on the main research questions. The propositions additionally served in the data analysis to help in further categorizing data into appropriate sub-categories under each theme.

The first theme was the overall relationship that the companies have with sustainable development as it can be expected to affect how the interviewees also perceive the FNCSD and the communication by the FNCSD. Additionally in order to tie in the questions with the analytical framework, the other themes were the national strategy on sustainable development – focusing on the content and the informational approach of communication (informational approach in Figure 5 – Analytical Framework) – and finally the FNCSD itself, capturing the relational focus of the communication (relational approach in Figure 5 - Analytical Framework).

The propositions from which interview questions were drafted for and which will help in answering RQ1 (“How does the FNCSD work to communicate about the national strategy on sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders?”) were the following:

- *PI.1:* The government communications environment is highly complex and inflexible
- *PI.2:* Government communication is a strategic tool to give effect to government strategy.

- *P1.3:* Governments should target and segment communication strategies for different companies
- *P1.4:* Government bodies should focus on two-way communication with stakeholders

The propositions which will help in answering RQ2 (“How is the FNCSD’s communication about the national strategy on sustainable development perceived by corporate stakeholders?”) and from which questions were derived for interviews was as follows:

- *P2.1:* Finnish companies approach commitment to sustainable development and communication about sustainable development with rhetoric of “weak” sustainability.
- *P2.2:* The credibility and trustworthiness of government communication is often questioned.
- *P2.3:* Perceptions of government communications vary from company to company
- *P2.4:* If stakeholders are involved by the government body, they are more likely to support the proposed strategy
- *P2.5:* Leadership in the government body affects stakeholders’ perception of the communication

The final question scheme for the semi-structured interviews was the following:

#### **THEME 1: “Sustainable development”**

- Approach and commitment to sustainable development (*P2.1 - how is SD defined, how is it present in the activities of the organization*)
- Perceptions and approach to communication about sustainable development (*P2.1 - how is SD communicated, to whom is SD communicated, how should SD be communicated*)

#### **THEME 2: “National strategy on sustainable development” (informational perspective of communication)**

- Image and awareness of the national strategy on sustainable development (*P2.3 - how is it currently perceived and why, how could it be improved*)
- Channels of communication used to communicate about the national strategy on SD (*P1.2 / P1.4 - what channels are currently used, how strategically are channels used, what channels should and could be used*)

- Content of communication on the national strategy on SD (*P1.1 / P1.3 - what issues are highlighted/targeted, what issues should be highlighted, how is the content understood, how relevant is the content seen to be*)

### **THEME 3: “FNCSD” (relational perspective of communication)**

- Role of leadership (*P2.5 - how does leadership affect involvement and perception of the national strategy on SD, what is seen as good leadership*)
- Image and reputation of the FNCSD (*P2.2 - how credible and trustworthy is the FNCSD seen as, what issues affect the image and reputation of the FNCSD*)
- Relationships and involvement (*P2.4 - how would company representatives describe their relationship with the FNCSD and vice versa; how much do the companies feel like they are being involved in the planning and implementation process of the national strategy on SD*)

### **3.2.3 CARRYING OUT INTERVIEWS**

All of the interviews were carried out in Finnish and recorded with the permission of the interviewee. The purpose of recording the interviews was to help the moderation of the conversation and interviewing as well as the writing of reliable transcripts of each interview. Additionally, recording interviews facilitated note taking and spot reflections of answers during interviews.

The 12 interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. Nine interviews were carried out face-to-face and three interviews were conducted over phone due to challenges in logistics and availabilities. All interviews were done during May and June 2014 and all face-to-face interviews were done in the offices of the interviewees. The interviewees represented all different categories of companies in terms of their affiliation with both the FNCSD and the national strategy on SD. A summary of the profiles of interviewees can be seen below in Table 3

Title	Responsibilities	Category (1 – 4)	Length of interview	Abbreviation of interviewee used in study
Head of Product Development	Responsible for knowledge of current and emerging trends and practices, executing product development plan	2	25min	INT1

Head of Sustainable Development	Responsible for all sustainable development initiatives and issues related to corporate social responsibility. Leads the company's stakeholder communication efforts.	1	30min	INT2
Head of Public Affairs	Responsible for communication strategy and societal relationships of the company	1	45min	INT3
Head of CSR	Responsible for developing and coordinating CSR strategy and for leading internal and external CSR-reporting.	3	30min	INT4
Head of Partnerships and Development	Responsible for scoping and developing strategic partnerships to support sustainable development	3	45min	INT5
Head of Development Cooperation and Communication	Responsible for development cooperation, private partnerships, external communication	3	45min	INT6
Representative of international, publicly listed company	Responsible for marketing, communications, corporate social responsibility, public affairs	2	40min	INT7
Environment and Communication Specialist	Responsible for communication, environmental affairs and corporate social responsibility related issues	4	25min	INT8
Head of Environment and Safety	Responsible for environmental and public affairs, safety issues and corporate social responsibility across the entire organization	1	25min	INT9
Head of CSR	Responsible for CSR-communication, stakeholder communication, coordinating internal working group for CSR and the organization's GRI-reporting	1	25min	INT10

Secretary General for Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development	Responsible for coordinating and developing international cooperation of national sustainable development initiatives; responsible for developing strategy for national sustainable development work in line with EU goals	-	45min	Sauli Rouhinen - SR
Deputy Secretary General for Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development	Responsible for developing and implementing both national strategy on sustainable development and sustainability indicators linked to it; main contact for developing and coordinating stakeholder communication	-	45min	Marja Innanen - MI

**Table 3. Categories** as mentioned previously: **1)** Finnish companies who have not committed to the national strategy on sustainable development **2)** Finnish companies who have committed to the national strategy after being convinced to do so by the FNCSD **3)** Finnish companies who have committed to the national strategy by their own will **4)** Finnish companies who are not familiar with the national strategy or the FNCSD

As stated by Roulston (2011), semi-structured interviews are often characterized by a high degree of flexibility as the order of questions in an interview is not necessarily always the same. The same held true for the interviews in this study which did not all proceeding the same way as interviewees were left to guide the interview as much as possible. As an interviewer I felt that it was important not to assume to know the topic better than the interviewee and not to interrupt the interviewee when they were answering. According to Thompson et al (1989) the respondent should be acknowledged as the experts in telling their own story. Questions were asked randomly depending on whether the interviewee naturally guided the interview or naturally answered certain themes.

All of the views and comments given by interviewees presented in this research have been translated from Finnish to English by the researcher. They are all direct translations and have been translated to the best of abilities as accurately as possible.

### 3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

All of the 12 interviews were audio taped and transcribed within a few days of the interview. The transcribed interviews were between 3 and 8 pages long, making a total 45 pages altogether. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011) point out that transcribing is very time consuming and suggest looking at methods in which the researcher does not need to transcribe the entire interview in detail. Nonetheless, the interviews for this research were transcribed completely as to ensure that no details were lost in the transcribing phase.

The data collection was planned in a way that would support analysis as well as possible – in other words by conducting thematic semi-structured interviews the initial analysis categories were also formulated. Question areas were also created under each interview theme based on propositions derived from the literature. The purpose of the propositions is to serve as a systematic tool in the actual data analysis phase but additionally to provide a better connection to the literature presented in Chapter 2. This connection is intended to help in ensuring that the analytical framework derived from the reviewed literature and the results of the research do not exist in isolation but rather that a genuine relationship is created between the reviewed literature and the final research findings.

According to Saunders et al. (2007), there exists no standardized approach to the analysis of qualitative data. Consequently, it is not uncommon to collect and organize the qualitative data into meaningful categories, unitize the data and then identify relationships. Eskola and Suoranta (1996, as quoted in Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2011) suggest approaching the analysis of qualitative data in three different ways: 1) transcribing the data and then moving on to analyzing, 2) transcribing the data, then coding it and then proceeding to the analysis or 3) simultaneously transcribing and coding the data and then starting the analysis (p. 136).

The data analysis of this research can be divided into four phases. First, all data was categorized with the help of the interview themes that were drawn from the literature review. The three main themes were 1) Sustainable development 2) National strategy on SD (informational approach) 3) FNCSD (relational approach). Propositions derived from the literature relevant to this study were placed under the themes. These propositions can be seen in sub-section 3.2.2 of this chapter.

Next, with the help of the themes and the propositions, differences and similarities of the data were mapped out and systematically grouped into categories. The themes were used as headlines in the initial stage of the categorization. After this first stage of categorization, irrelevant quotes were removed and the quotes that could distinctly be grouped under a same category were grouped together. This stage benefitted from the propositions, which served to further categorize data into appropriate sub-categories under each theme.

Thirdly, the most valuable insights regarding the research were identified and any possible relationships and recurring patterns between the themes was explored. Although most comments were prompted by and filtered with the propositions and planned themes under research questions, liberty was taken in placing a view or quote under a specific proposition even if it had surfaced into the discussion during a different stage of the interview.

Finally all the data was reflected upon with the help of and against the analytical framework of the research. Both the findings and analysis of this study are presented in the next chapter.

### **3.4 LENS OF THE RESEARCHER AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY**

As this study consists of interpreting other people's views and perceptions, it must be acknowledged that the researcher can have an effect on the results as they are to some extent personal interpretations. It should additionally be pointed out that the researcher has a personal interest in the topic at hand and that the research interest surfaced out of both personal curiosities as well as from the FNCSD's needs to explore the topic. Furthermore, the researcher has certain existing understandings of sustainable development, stakeholder communication and government communication which are quite critical. Nonetheless regarding the study, the above mentioned issues should not affect the results as the study aims to specifically focus on how external stakeholders – Finnish companies – perceive stakeholder communication from the FNCSD as well as what type of work goes behind this communication effort.

The choice of a qualitative research method was also done based on the personal viewpoint of the researcher: the researcher does not believe there to be only one right or wrong way for carrying out government to business stakeholder communication but rather various options to do so. Additionally,

results may vary depending on the interviewer and the interviewees. Nonetheless the researcher is also in a position of constructing new knowledge through own interpretations of the results of the interviews.

A widely accepted set of criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness in a qualitative research is presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985), according to whom trustworthiness as a concept entails four different aspects that measure the quality of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

Credibility plays a central role in making research findings trustworthy and of high quality. Bryman and Bell (2003) define credibility as a way in which the researcher makes the findings of the study acceptable in the eyes of others. In other words, approving the study with the members that took part in it and conducting it according to good research practices. In terms of approval and credibility, this study has been peer evaluated by an academic supervisor and during Thesis seminars. Both the transcribed interviews and the actual Thesis were sent to interviewees for comments and suggestions for modifications. This approach has also contributed to the transparency of this study.

The transferability of this study refers to how similar it is with previous research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 294). To demonstrate how the present research links to earlier studies, previous research is discussed in the literature review. Nonetheless the aim is not to replicate but to see if findings can be transferred or applied in another environment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this regard it should be acknowledged that current study has been carried out as a case study and that the findings can be mainly applied within the specific sample and conditions of this study. Despite this, it can be nonetheless speculated that the findings could be lucrative for representatives of other government bodies dealing with stakeholder communication with the private sector.

The aspect of dependability in this study can be described to correspond to reliability (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Dependability can be considered to evaluate how similar results a replicative study would yield (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This in mind it is important for the researcher to provide adequate information about the process linked to the research. The process of carrying out this research is explained throughout the report in order to showcase what the researcher has done and to demonstrate



that the way in which the research has been conducted is logical. Additionally, the sections 3.2 and 3.3 in this Chapter 3 go through the more specific phases of data collection and analysis.

Finally, conformability relates to the fact that “the researcher can be shown to have acted in good faith” (Bryman and Bell, 2003, p. 414). Additionally conformability addresses the objectivity of the study and refers primarily to the ability of the researcher to link the interpretations and findings to the actual data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). To address this criterion, when presenting findings, references and quotes have been highlighted in order to confirm that they come from interviewees. In addition conclusions have been attempted to be anchored as tightly as possible to the interview responses to make as clear as possible to the reader where conclusions have been derived from.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter will go on to present the findings of the study. The main source of the findings was the set of interviews conducted with ten private sector stakeholder representatives as well as with the two members of the Secretariat of the FNCSD. The chapter is divided into two sections: each of the two sections focus on one of the two main research questions which are tightly linked to the propositions and interview themes derived from the literature review and analytical framework. The main goal of this Thesis study was to shed light on how stakeholder communication is practiced in the government to business (G2B) sector in Finland, and particularly how it is practiced in the context of sustainable development.

The findings are discussed in the order of the following two main research questions:

**RQ1: How does the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development work to communicate about the national strategy on sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders?**

**RQ2: How is the Finnish National Commission's communication about the national strategy perceived by corporate stakeholders?**

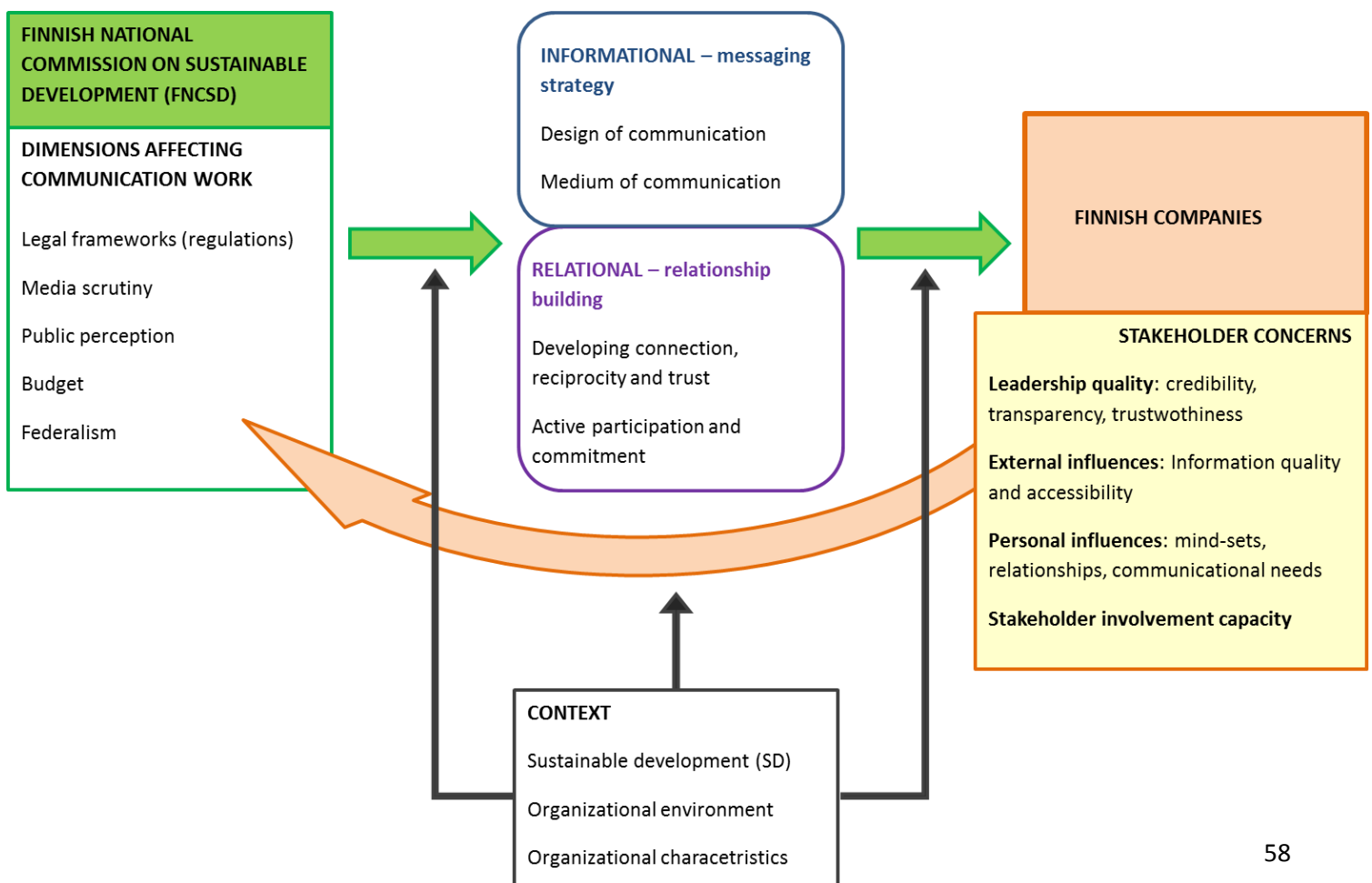
Based the order above, section 4.1 will focus on analyzing how a government body works to communicate about sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders. Section 4.2 aims to address the question of how private sector stakeholders perceive the communication on sustainable development by a government body. Before proceeding to discuss how private sector stakeholders experience the communication, it is important to firstly understand how they perceive sustainable development and its role in business. This serves to help in drawing conclusions as to how they would process information on sustainable development and any communication linked to it.

The majority of the comments and perceptions of the interviewees in the analysis were prompted via the interview themes and propositions linked to each research questions. Nonetheless some flexibility

was taken in moving a comment under a more appropriate-seeming proposition although it might have come into discussion at another point during the interview discussion.

As mentioned in Chapter 3 on Methodology, the final phase of the data analysis was the reflection on the data with the help of and against the analytical framework of this research. The framework helped in organizing data and findings on how a government body works to communicate about sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders and how this government body's communication about sustainable development is perceived by private sector stakeholders in Finland.

As depicted in the framework, factors that have the greatest impact on the daily activities of a government body such as the FNCSD are legal frameworks, federalism, politics, media scrutiny and poor public perception. On the other end, the main issues influencing stakeholder perceptions of the communication are leadership quality, external influences, personal influences and involvement capacity. The most central part of the framework is the actual process of stakeholder communication between the FNCSD and the Finnish companies is visualized by the two square boxes between the



parties representing the informational and relational dimensions of the communication between them.

The analytical framework is based on the reviewed literature from which the propositions are derived from. Hence the issues raised by the suggested propositions link directly to the different dimensions of the analytical framework. It was thus seen as most logical to analyze the data one proposition at a time and finally gather the findings from the group of propositions to answer to each of the two research questions.

#### **4.1 GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION WORK ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The theme in the interview scheme covering the first research question was named “National strategy on sustainable development”. The theme consisted of four different propositions that were derived from the literature presented earlier. These propositions were:

P1.1) The government communications environment is highly complex and inflexible

P1.2) Government communication is a strategic tool to give effect to government strategy

P1.3) Governments should target and segment communication strategies for different companies

P1.4) Government bodies should focus on two-way communication with stakeholders.

The findings linked to RQ1 in this section are explored through these above mentioned propositions.

##### **P1.1: The government communications environment is highly complex and inflexible**

While all respondents would be able to give their reflections on how they perceived the governmental communications environment, the most accurate feelings on this topic were gained from the actual communicators operating in it: the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General of the FNCSD. When discussing both day to day communications practices and planning the communications efforts, the main sentiments that would arise during the interview discussion was that of being challenged in terms of how to best approach the communication strategically to the specific stakeholder group of private sector actors. This issue was best crystallized in the following comment:

*”[...] From the communication point of view, the greatest challenge between these two sectors is in how they can be reached: it is for instance easier to reach municipalities with mass communication or targeted events. Companies must on the other hand be treated as individual actors with significantly more varying communicational needs, even among themselves.” - MI, Deputy Secretary General, FNCSD*

Moreover, the overarching feeling that would arise when asked about how the Secretariat thought stakeholders would evaluate their communication was that of underperformance: the Secretariat described their efforts as “modest”. As mapped out in the government communication decision wheel by Liu et al.(2007), the factors that have the greatest impact on the daily activities of actors such as the FNCSD operating in an external microenvironment are legal frameworks, federalism, politics, media scrutiny and poor public perception. These factors also held true in the case of the FNCSD: the interviewees linked legal frameworks and politics to the designing and implementing of communication, as there were both not enough resources to contact companies as intensively as aspired and the appropriate manner in which it was seen that the contact should be made seemed to be stiff and fairly regulated. The latter point was explicitly highlighted in Marja Innanen’s comment below: “We cannot do marketing about this [...]”. The FNCSD attempted to overcome this challenge by trying to find appropriate intermediaries that would boost their image and attract companies.

*“[...] presently we cannot, however, speak directly to businesses and need to find the key intermediaries to take this role. The world is full of the actors and initiatives and if we could be seen by companies as so-called cooperation partners it would already be quite significant.” – SR, Secretary General, FNCSD*

Other issues challenging the communication planning and implementation were noted to be mainly the lack of resources in finances and time as well as the low interest in the initiative internally, within the actual government.

*“[...] On the other hand, although we are involved in the European network for sustainable development that produces this type of material, not even all the members of the committee follow up on it.” -SR, Secretary General, FNCSD*

*“I would say that the current tools in our use are quite moderate and this is why larger scale events and meetings are in a central position in our communication. We need to rethink our communication to the private sector within the present limitations [...] I am positive that companies are not getting the value they would hope for at the moment. We cannot do marketing about this but we do have certain medias who write about us and our activities.” - MI, Deputy Secretary General, FNCSD*

**Conclusion to P1.1:** Although not distinctly stated, it can be understood from the discussion and comments from the interviewees that government bodies indeed face pressure and expectations towards their communication from both within the government as well as from the private sector stakeholders they communicate with. Moreover, these two entities have fairly contrasting views as to what the communication should be like: although (based on interviews with company representatives) private sector stakeholders would anticipate more active and targeted contact from the FNCSD, the rest of the government sector would be less favorable of an increasingly marketing like style of approach to the communication. In addition to this, it was clear that the FNCSD faced significant challenges with financial resources in the planning and implementation of the communication activities. In short, it can be concluded that the government communications environment is complex and relatively inflexible in the case of the FNCSD’s communication as well.

#### **P1.2: Government communication is a strategic tool to give effect to government strategy**

As mentioned in the literature review, there has been ample agreement on viewing government communication as a means to give effect to policy goals (Zaharna, 2009). As stated by Hallahan et al (2007) strategic communications is the “purposeful use of an organization to fulfill its mission” and governments and government bodies – alike other organizations – make use of strategic communications to attain their organizational objectives.

The main channels currently used by the FNCSD have been email, a newsletter, the thematic microsite of the national strategy and social media. Although there seems to be unanimous knowledge on a general level as to what channels are currently used or available in the communication on the national

strategy, the source of the communication was not clear to all participants. The following quotes best embody these reactions:

*INT4: “The majority of communication takes place on social media – Facebook-pages, Twitter...and there’s also the newsletter. [...]Twitter is quite sufficient in keeping up to date on who else has become involved in the national strategy.”*

*INT7: “I came across it [the national commitment] via a newsletter...in any case I found it somewhere online or through online news. Could it have been the webpages of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry or then the newsletter of the Ministry of Environment? Not sure.”*

Roughly three quarters of the interviewees brought up the role of forums and events particularly when discussing communication channels. Fairly explicitly stated, the following comments advocate the need for specific intermediary actors to support communication efforts and to reach companies via external influencers:

*INT9: “The best channel would probably be via different business associations, symposiums and discussion events [...] yes, through certain types of gatekeepers.”*

*INT10: “I would imagine that all companies who belong to a corporate responsibility network, such as FIBS (Finnish Business in Society) could not have avoided overhearing more about this national commitment.”*

Additionally, one interviewee particularly highlighted the push from the FNCSD in revising and updating the company’s own communication regarding the national strategy:

*INT5: “It was great that Marja Innanen was so active about us communicating about this commitment on our social networks and this is how it should be: commitments made have to be visible also in the communication coming from companies.”*

**Conclusion to P1.2:** Although the responses to the FNCSD's actual implementation of the communication pointed to areas to improve on, the attempted use of the communication can be nonetheless seen to have been strategic in the sense that it managed to initiate a broad exchange between the FNCSD and private sector stakeholders and to draw attention to both the relationship between the two parties as well as the companies' use of communication when communicating about the national strategy. As visible in the reactions of interviewees, respondents knew what channels were used and were active in providing their feedback to improve the communication. In summary, it can be concluded that the aim of the FNCSD's communication has been a strategic one in creating support for the national strategy and in enforcing its relationship with private sector stakeholders.

### **P1.3: Governments should target and segment communication strategies for different companies**

It became clear during interviews that all respondents had an idea of what the communication coming from the FNCSD should ideally be like and what type of content should be highlighted. These ideas obviously varied due to the diversity of individual respondents and who also to some extent represented the different ideologies governing the company they worked for.

When asked about how the FNCSD communicates and how it should ideally communicate about the national strategy to companies, the key universal themes arising from the interviews related to how the role of content was viewed: some respondent advocated stronger emphasis on the dimension of how the strategy would add to the company's mission while others felt that the most weight in the message should be on what types of support systems the national strategy would provide. The latter view was brought up especially in relation to small and medium sized companies looking to join the national strategy. Yet another view underlined that it was crucial to craft messages in a way that they could be easily diffused within their organization to upper management as opposed to solely employees dealing with the company's sustainability and responsibility issues.

*INT2: "SMEs have strong reservations in taking part in these types of initiatives as they see that it requires a lot of resources from them that they don't have – but in reality this is not the case! [...] it is actually smart, forward-looking business that will do the opposite of eating up resources."*



*INT3: “[...] very few would know when the communicator is a body from public administration, a state-owned entity or a private entity...but this shouldn’t even be as essential as the content that is communicated. [...] regardless of the channel, one should always prioritize substance - to outline the content and then consider to whom it is been communicated.”*

A general agreement regarding communication was nonetheless noticeable on the importance of clarity, strong key messaging and a more practical approach.

*INT4: “[...] if you really want new companies to join and want to communicate about this to them, you should make the available material as concise as possible. Practical examples also make it more accessible: when we came on board information on what the commitment really means was much more limited and not clear – now you have the chance on drawing from great examples that will make it easier to join. Well thought out information material is key.”*

*INT8: “When communicating to companies, it is important to spark interest and to have a simple overview [of the commitment], where objectives are clearly displayed. Having in other words the most important key messages highlighted.”*

One respondent approached the national strategy from a broader perspective suggested that the FNCSD would modify and then frame the communication of the national strategy so that it would speak to an entire industry. In other words, making it possible to make a commitment to the strategy as an entire industry and not just a single company in order to decrease overlaps with different local initiatives and minimize the risk for the company of having to do the same thing twice, both in the frame of potential industry initiatives and the national strategy. Nonetheless this approach was not shared by all interviewees who felt that both the content and the messaging of the national strategy should be as cross-cutting as possible. The quotes below show these differing points of views:

*INT2: “What could also be considered would be making it possible to make a commitment to the strategy as an entire industry and not just a single company, and have any innovation regarding the collective goal supported or subsidized as opposed to just marking down individual goals that have already been marked down somewhere else.”*

*INT4: “What makes it credible is the way it has been prepared and who is involved in it...that it is not too industry-specific [...] additionally the types of mechanisms and indicators used to create and evaluate the initiative play a role. [...] Initiatives for sustainability need to have a cross-cutting approach as possible; otherwise they become too targeted at one specific industry.”*

Many companies additionally expected the FNCSD to underline in its communication and message content the international dimension of the national strategy as well as the shared value it would bring both to the companies and to Finland as a country. Internationality was also seen as key selling point when promoting the national strategy to companies, both larger corporations as well as SMEs: SMEs would gain salience and be able to anchor themselves to the strategy's “brand awareness” in the international arena and larger corporations often felt internationality should be a given taken that many companies these days operate either directly or indirectly in or with global markets.

*INT2: “We’re talking about a governmental commitment and when [...] a Finnish company is committed to a national initiative of the Finnish government, it will certainly add value for both Finland and [the company]. Bringing an international aspect to this would actually be extremely vital, as it would simultaneously promote the awareness of Finland as a responsible country and as a supporter of responsible business.”*

*INT8: “My first thought would be to channel messages via different international business forums [...] Another thing is the fact that many companies (including our own) operates globally: if you think that this is just a Finnish initiative, Finland is at the end of the day a relatively small part of the market we operate in, even though we have our headquarters here.”*

**Conclusion to P1.3:** As explicitly reflected in the comments made by interviewees, there is a clear demand for communication that considers more specific needs and that highlights the key messages relevant to the enterprise in question. To conclude, this proposition can be seen to be valid in this case.

#### **P1.4: Government bodies should focus on two-way communication with stakeholders**

According to Zaharna (2009) relationships are “the pivotal, central feature in government communication” (p.91). Despite being closely linked with the proposition regarding the general strategic use of communication, this proposition specifically looks at the communication from the perspective of stakeholder communication theory. As pointed out in section 2.4 via the argument made by Grunig (1998), stakeholder communication among government communication practitioners has been mainly characterized by a one-way symmetrical model of communication that simply disseminates information, while the two-way symmetrical model of communication that strives to engage stakeholders into dialogue has been defended as a more viable alternative (Grunig and Jaatinen, 1998).

The pull for face-to-face events surfaced various times in relation to other propositions as well. Put differently, when discussing issues related to sustainable development, rich media was preferred over lean media and companies were more receptive to face-to-face encounters as opposed to solely written information. This approach was also reflected in companies’ own approaches to communicating about sustainable development to their stakeholders (see discussion on proposition 2.1 )

*INT1: “[...] a seminar or an event at which to share experiences live would be fitting at this point.”*

*INT6: “[...] before we would also only send press releases but now we have been increasingly more present at different events and forums [...] Being present and doing things in practice is always more concrete than having a piece of writing in a newspaper.”*

**Conclusion to P1.4:** Regarding the take on two-way communication, there was a unanimous agreement on the need for better dialogue between the FNCSD and the companies, especially in the form of live encounters, as well as more prominent channels to contribute to the conversation on the national strategy. This proposition can thus be considered to be fitting in this case.

### **Summary to RQ1) How does the FNCSD work to communicate about the national strategy on sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders**

**Complex communication environment, conflicting expectations affect communication work:** To summarize the findings for the first research question, none of the four propositions derived from the literature were contradicted. The government communications environment was characterized in literature as highly complex and inflexible (Liu et al, 2007; Pounsford and Meara 2004; Gelders, de Walle and Steven, 2005; Jones, 2002), which also held true in the case of the FNCSD: the FNCSD struggles in finding a balance between the starkly opposing demands from stakeholders to adopt a stronger marketing orientation in their communication, and the constraints and expectations from Finnish governance and politics regarding government communication and diplomacy. The FNCSD also faces challenges in best adapting their communication activities to the scarce resources they have available to them.

**Communication attempted to be used as a strategic tool:** Despite the challenging environmental factors to consider in their communication activities, the FNCSD does aim to conduct communication about the national strategy in a strategic manner: they have attempted to engage in personal contact with the private sector stakeholders to build better relationships as well as to create a certain image of the national strategy that would appeal to companies. Nonetheless they have not managed to leverage the social interaction with their private sector stakeholder to gain a wider awareness and commitment to the national strategy.

**Stakeholders demanded more practicality from the FNCSD's communication** in the form of clearer, targeted key messages on what the national strategy entailed and what value it would bring, concrete examples of what committing to it actually meant in practice, and what exactly was expected from companies. Additionally, responses from the interviews indicated that communicational needs differed among companies: interviewees would each underline what they felt most important to communicate, the issues brought up all being inherently linked and relevant to the specific organization in question. In other words, the effectiveness and positive reception of the communication on the national strategy could be increased should the FNCSD tailor key messages to take into account the core mission of each private sector stakeholder.

**Additional findings – call for emphasizing international dimension and stronger marketing approach:**

The interviews also brought up additional findings that were indirectly related to the research question: based on the discussions on what stakeholders seemed to envisage as ideal communication, the FNCSD should continue on the path of stronger branding and campaigning. Although these two practices, historically transferred over from the area of marketing and corporate communication, may still be considered as a slight vulgarization of traditional government communication (Melissen, 2007), interview responses indicated that there was no perceived drop in credibility should a government body adopt such communication practices from the private sector. Rather it was encouraged for the sake of effectiveness and for building a stronger image and awareness of the national strategy. Elaborating further on the communicational approach of the FNCSD, the literature emphasizing the need to focus on two-way communication with stakeholders (Grunig, 2009) was also supported by the findings: there was a strong demand from respondents for direct, and preferably live, channels or forums of interaction with the FNCSD as well as the use of strategic intermediaries in order to improve the dialogue between the organizations and the government body. Another (additional) topic that surfaced regarded the content of communication: the points considered to be most worthy of highlighting in future stakeholder communication were the internationality and the global dimension of the national strategy. Interviewees felt that being able to anchor their company's operations to globally renowned frameworks and initiatives was essential as many of them operated either directly or indirectly in or with global markets. Another issue concerning content was its scalability: processing sustainable related information within the organization seemed to happen in silos and initiatives such as the national strategy would often be left with solely the employee(s) dealing with the company's sustainability and responsibility issues. Moreover, employees dealing with sustainability issues did not always hold executive power within the company. This why crafting the content of the communication in a manner that would permit easy diffusion of the messages within the organization, especially to top management and executives, was seen as crucial.

## **4.2 STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS ON GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The themes in the interviews covering the second research question linked to all of the three themes in the interview scheme: "Sustainable development", "National strategy on sustainable development" and

“FNCSO”. This research question includes five different propositions that were drawn from the reviewed literature. These propositions were

P2.1) Finnish companies approach commitment to sustainable development and communication about sustainable development with rhetoric of “weak” sustainability

P2.2) The credibility and trustworthiness of government communication is often questioned

P2.3) Perceptions of government communications vary from company to company

P2.4) If stakeholders are involved by the government body, they are more likely to support the proposed strategy

P2.5) Leadership in the government body affects stakeholders’ perception of the communication.

Finally, the main findings to RQ1 are discussed through the propositions.

### **P2.1: Finnish companies approach commitment to sustainable development and communication about sustainable development with rhetoric of “weak” sustainability.**

The premise of this proposition was that the way in which an organization would define and engage with sustainable development would affect the manner in which they respond to any communication about it. Not surprisingly, interviewees seemed to have a hard time defining sustainable development and explaining what it meant to them personally.

*INT7: “Sustainability is a bit of a challenging word that is translated differently by different people.”*

As surfaced during the literature review, the ambiguity of the concept of sustainable development was also present in all interviews: there was no one universal definition given and the description would be decidedly tied to the person providing it. Although there was a strong tendency to approach SD through the lens of the natural environment, common points regarding the definition did arise and the majority of interviewees would go about explaining sustainable development through the so-called conventional pillars of sustainability – social, economic and environmental.

*INT2: “Sustainable development means ensuring society the possibility and opportunity to develop in a sustainable manner and as a company it is certainly a certain type of “license to*

*operate” – in other words, operating in a way that helps us grow while staying in within the environmental, social and economic boundaries.”*

*INT9: “Sustainable development does not really have one clear-cut definition, and many talk about the principle of ‘people, planet and profit’. I would see that from a company's perspective, they are strongly in the background of all activities.”*

The main drivers for a company’s initiatives or actions regarding sustainable development were customer feedback and pressure from their own internal and external stakeholders as opposed to legal regulation.

*INT9: “A company’s corporate responsibility is nonetheless mostly related to answering to stakeholders’ expectations and gaining their approval and our own so-called ‘license to operate’. Stakeholders would often define responsibility as something that goes beyond legal requirements”*

*INT4: “Sustainable behavior is not an extra - it is also already expected by consumers. [...] companies who don’t have strong direct touch points with consumers might take a longer time to understand the need and urgency to change.”*

Sustainable development was frequently used synonymously with corporate social responsibility and seen as a part of strategy. Nonetheless, the organization’s closer relationship with SD and its effects on the company’s activities depended on how important it was perceived to be. This in turn would be reflected in where units dealing with sustainable development were located within the organizational structure. Among some respondents it was even integrated as part of day to day activities and communication strategy as opposed to something worked on in isolation with regards to the rest of organizational operations.

*INT10: “Companies have a wide range of practices as to which department or organizational unit sustainability issues are located and it depends on the companies what they consider to be responsible business - or what the importance of responsible business even is. [...] strategy on*

*corporate responsibility and sustainability need to be initiated by upper management in order for something to happen.”*

*INT4: “We aim to have employees and especially higher management engaged and involved in discussions in Twitter for instance, where they can show what they are doing through their work.”*

To many companies, the breadth and the ambiguity of the concept made it seem as a more challenging issue to deal with. A message that seemed to come through from interviewees was the feeling of having tough expectations regarding communication about sustainable development and, among others, the demand for practical actions. Although the SD activities an organization carried out were aimed to be communicated to stakeholders as holistically as possible, balancing rich and lean media by showcasing their SD activities in reporting, in written publications, web, social media and via different live events, most interviewees still felt a great deal of external pressure and expectations in their communication work.

*INT10: “We don’t really put it apart from other communications: we communicate sustainable development in all that we do. It is part of our strategy and has a prominent role on our agenda.”*

*INT2: “We [companies] are expected to tell in a very practical detailed manner as to what kind of actions we are taking regarding sustainable development. In this sense government and corporate communication about the topic differ: it must be much more than only mere words, we need to show examples and metrics on what has been done and how has it been measured.”*

As companies felt pressure about communicating about their own activities around sustainable development in a concrete manner, they would automatically seek content that was practical and straightforward – in other words, immediately applicable in their own communications work.



*INT3: "[...] messages towards desired images regarding sustainable development using less abstract and more specific approaches [...] consciously avoiding expressions such as "as much as possible" or "wherever possible" and opting for "all or nothing" – clear lines to take."*

**Conclusion to P2.1:** Understanding the context of the environment (i.e. sustainable development) is essential with regards to perceptions of the communication coming from the FNCSD. This proposition did not apply in this case as all in all; the narrative implied by interviewees –representatives of Finnish companies and organizations –was not that of weak sustainability. A strong rhetoric of SD seemed to be present among interviewees as individuals, in the activities their organization was carrying out, as well as in their communication.

*INT3: "When your activities are logical and responsible, when communication channels and messages are consistent, then this is also enforces your economic strategy. A responsibly behaving company will be in a better financial position five years from now than a one that doesn't."*

## **P2.2: The credibility and trustworthiness of government communication is often questioned.**

The image of the FNCSD as a credible, reliable and trustworthy actor plays a crucial role in the communication they would carry out. Based on interviews, there seemed to be a general agreement on the FNCSD being an authoritative and trustworthy actor - characteristics which would be often likened to their communication. The fact that the FNCSD was communicating about an issue that goes beyond legal regulations gave interviewees a further positive connotation with it. The following quotes help demonstrate these dynamics:

*INT1: "[...] I do feel that the more prestigious actors they have on board the more it would increase the credibility and authoritativeness of the initiative or program. Based on this I do think the current national strategy and commission are already quite prestigious. [...] I would say that having communication coming from the government that is outside the mandatory legalities makes the national commitment and the FNCSD seem stronger."*

How the FNCSD is seen has a powerful impact on how the content and the actual communication is both received and interpreted. As the FNCSD is currently placed under the Ministry of Environment, respondents tended to focus on mainly the environmental aspects of the national strategy as it was perceived as an initiative exclusively run headed by the Ministry of Environment. Additionally, when linked to the Ministry of Environment the FNCSD was perceived to have overlaps between other Ministries which in turn took away from the credibility of their communication. In other words, the interviewees felt that there was internal competition and competing initiatives within government, due to which the FNCSD and their messaging did not at times have the same salience they were seen to deserve.

*INT6: “The actor leading the entire process – in this case the Ministry of Environment –is also important as it adds reliability to the operations and communication.”*

*INT9: “It’s a bit unclear what the relation between the different actors is as the Ministry of Employment has –to my recollection –an indicator-based scheme similar to this one. There seems to be a little parallelism visible between different actors.”*

As touched upon in the above mentioned quote from **INT9**, the credibility and trustworthiness of the communication of a governmental body such as the FNCSD was considered to be affected by various attributes. One of these was the diversity of the network or the actors involved in the Commission’s work: the credibility and trustworthiness of the FNCSD and their communication was seen to stem from the diversity of the leadership and of not only having one school of thought leading the processes of the actual strategy.

*INT3: “It doesn’t really matter who is in charge as long as it is objectively reliable. Put differently, rather have representatives from six parties than three so that reliability, credibility and objectivity are maintained at every level.”*

*INT2: “Sure it has a meaning in terms of what kind of resources they have available and how credibly they contribute to the agenda of the program. I myself also looked immediately at what kinds of parties are involved as to make sure it does not remain on the level of mere words and*

*talk. So yes, composition of leadership is therefore relevant and gives weight to the communication and the commitment itself.”*

In addition to the composition of the governing and managing actors of the FNCSD, other aspects influencing the credibility of communication were continuity, predictability of messaging, strong stakeholder involvement and the role of intermediaries. The following quotes illustrate these attributes that should be filtered in the activities and image of the FNCSD to ensure the credibility of its communications:

*INT4: “As long as it is as open and transparent and somewhat predictable we’re fine. Issues should be communicated when they’re being processed as opposed when they’re already done.”*

*INT7: “Communication should be open, predictable and messages should be consistent. If an actor has a certain way of communicating about things, it should not be changed drastically...or then changes should be done gradually. [...] Credibility both in the private and public sector is affected by how you are able to get another body or neutral parties to speak on your behalf on the activities you are engaged in - this is immediately more credible than if you were the one discussing achievements.”*

**Conclusion to P2.2:** Although issues relating to the credibility and trustworthiness of both the FNCSD and the communication of the FNCSD surfaced in all interviews, neither one of these attributes were questioned. As determined in the section above, it can be said that responses from interviewees partly contradicted this proposition in the case of the FNCSD.

### **P2.3: Perceptions of government communications vary from company to company**

The way in which companies perceive government communication was approached by exploring how interviewees would perceive the communication done about the national strategy; its image, reputation and most important areas for improvement that were mentioned. Another topic that surfaced beside this in all of the interviews was the contrasting of communication practices on sustainable development issues between the private and the public sector. Government communication about SD was at times

seen to slightly differ from corporate communication as it was not seen to have the same pressure of including a profit-oriented narrative directed at investors.

*INT9: “The government as a public actor would of course have a slightly different type of angle to communication as opposed to the private sector which has the responsibility of ensuring responsible, profitable performance. This aspect may not be present in the same way for a state actor.”*

Overall, there was a firm, shared perception of the national strategy struggling with a great lack of awareness. This came through comments that referred to the low visibility of the national strategy’s messaging in mainstream media and outside the group of actors by some means involved in the strategy and/or strategy work.

*INT1: “I don’t really watch that much TV myself but have not seen any talk of either the National Commission or the national strategy featured in any news broadcast. Nonetheless I do listen to the radio news lot in of both Finnish and Swedish and haven’t heard of anything there either. It has not really been that visible in public after it was launched.”*

*INT2: “It has probably remained prominent only among a certain group of people who are already engrossed in and active about the subject. I myself heard about this in the Confederation of Finnish Industries’ working group for corporate responsibility, so the awareness of the initiative has probably not spread widely enough.”*

*INT8: “At least for me, this commitment was quite the unfamiliar. It seems like it is a fairly new initiative... so the image is not yet –in my opinion – that strong. I do not think that it is in public knowledge what exactly the commitment entails. The entity seems currently a bit flimsy.”*

Nonetheless the communication done on the strategy has been successful in instilling in roughly half of the interviewed private sector representatives a perception that it is a worthwhile initiative that has the potential to involve a large part of society in a holistic agenda pushing forth sustainable development. Committing to the national strategy also gave some interviewees a certain type of approval of their

corporate operations and existence; it was seen as something that strengthened their belief in their own activities and supported the company's own communicational efforts in SD.

*INT3: "We see that this is something that would enforce our sense of responsibility internally – that our work is based on the right principles and that it conveys this same message to our most vital stakeholder groups; our employees, future employees, customers, decision-makers and regulators."*

*INT4: "[...] the commitment has a strong, solid vision: 'creating a prosperous and sustainable Finland within the limits and carrying capacity of nature'".*

The other half of interviewees voiced out their thoughts on how they felt that the national strategy seemed to be just another initiative launched by the government that was competing with the plethora of other programs, schemes and frameworks. One interviewee summed up this feeling by comparing the situation of companies to that of consumers, regarding different "brands" of SD initiatives. Some respondents also felt that being present in too many places would water down efforts in showcasing SD and that it was more credible and consistent also in terms of communication to simply focus on a selected few.

*INT5: "[...] companies are soon in the same position as consumers: do we take the one that is locally produced or the one with the Nordic Eco label or the one backed by Rainforest Alliance...what "brand" of initiative to take that would be the most relevant for us?"*

*INT9: "The main reason for our decision was simply that there are already so many of these. We are also already involved in two initiatives from two different Ministries and active in our own programs [...] we saw that we simply don't have resources to participate in a plethora of initiatives. On the other hand we also want to keep our own communication and messaging clear and consistent, so that there is no vagueness in what initiatives we participate in and what we participate in one hundred percent."*

Nevertheless this point of view was not shared by all, as some considered that if a company truly want to be and show that they are serious about SD, they should be one hundred percent involved in many different schemes. While this thought was somewhat salient amount interviewees, many still expressed their concerns about the national strategy coming across as something requiring extra resources from companies. The following quotes and comments capture these sentiments:

*INT1: “Many companies might simply not have the resources to commit; businesses might not have the capacity to commit to such an initiative, which is seen as an additional program or expenditure.”*

*INT2: “SMEs have strong reservations in taking part in these types of initiatives as they see that it requires a lot of resources from them that they don’t have – but in reality this is not the case! [...] it is actually smart, forward-looking business that will do the opposite of eating up resources.”*

*INT8: “I’d also be thinking about what is the actual value that this commitment would be bringing to my business.”*

The communications related issues interviewees felt that needed attention held rather wide agreement than contrasting views: more or less half of the interviewees saw that their perception of and reaction to the communication would be more positive if the messages about the national strategy were to have a more global perspective. Nevertheless companies operating locally did not care for focusing on a global narrative but did not undermine it either. One interviewee saw that the main issues affecting the reception of the communication were linked to how the messages fit the larger, national political agenda - implying, in other words, that the messages would be deemed more impactful if they had a strong political agenda for sustainable development that would support them. The quotes below demonstrate these views:

*INT7: “I see that the political agenda is one issue that affects the awareness and approachability of the national strategy [...] few have a strong agenda for sustainable development.”*

*INT8: “Another thing is the fact that many companies (including our own) operates globally: if you think that this is just a Finnish initiative, Finland is at the end of the day a relatively small part of the market we operate in, even though we have our headquarters here. Additionally, if I think about small and medium sized companies, this commitment could help, for example, in gaining better access to international markets or be seen as a stronger and more responsible player in Finland....and from a communications aspect, in gaining a frame to communicate the sustainable initiatives of the business.”*

**Conclusion to P2.3:** This proposition can be said to be only somewhat applicable as companies would mainly agree or have similar experiences and perceptions of the communicational practices regarding the national strategy. A strong consensus came through when discussing the image that the respondents had of the strategy and what they believed that the grander public had of it. Only slightly differentiating points of views would arise when discussing room for improvement, as respondents would focus on points of development that would support their own corporate agenda and goals.

**P2.4: If stakeholders are involved by the government body, they are more likely to support the proposed strategy**

In general, it felt that the interviewees had two-fold opinions when describing their relationship with the FNCSD: on one hand, respondents would very often refer to Marja Innanen, the Deputy Secretary General of the FNCSD, by her first name and giving the impression of having close, informal ties with the FNCSD but on the other hand they would advocate for tighter relationship and better collaboration. Marja Innanen was mentioned in every interview in relation to the commitment or regarding the communication taking place between the FNCSD and the companies, and she seems to have gained salience among companies as the “face” of the FNCSD. The slightly conflicting messaging and two-sided opinions can be illustrated with the following quotes:

*INT4: “...our initial involvement was actually pretty self-driven: after noticing that something like this was being formulated, I contacted Marja personally and asked her to come and tell us more about it. [...] I would say that the relationship is quite loose, as we are not a member of the Commission. [...] Making this link tighter should be something to think about.”*

*INT10: “The relationship is currently perhaps a bit stale: although we have been made aware of the existence and responsibilities of the FNCSD, there is no open information available regarding their meetings or their agenda – these would be interesting topics to hear more about.”*

With regards to the level of involvement, there appears to be a clear pull from nearly all of the interviewees for higher levels of engagement. Throughout the interviews engagement, dialogue, cooperation and better accentuating the role of legal emerged to the discussion and it was clear that these factors affected how the respondents related to the national strategy and the FNCSD. This was particularly apparent in the quote from the following interviewees:

*INT9: “[...] ideas and guidelines are not developed in way that they would be in isolation from the work to be implemented. Different stakeholders have to be strongly involved in such a process. [...] Very rarely does one see discussion on corporate responsibility and sustainability that would truly underline the role of the private sector [...] the private sector is the one who would ultimately bring about change.”*

*INT7: “I would hope that the added value that this national commitment would be to see companies having a more active role in these matters...and having this as a better channel of conducting a certain type of societal dialogue with public officials.”*

It was noted during the interviews that interviewees who had been or whose organizations had been involved in the planning process of the national strategy from an early stage discussed it in a more positive light and had made their own commitment to it early on. This was visible in the following comments:

*INT1: “We joined the national commitment because we were personally asked to do so. [...] We were debating for a long time whether to commit to the national strategy or not... finally we saw it as a great way to improve our own activity and at the same time work in accordance to the grander societal objectives agreed upon regarding sustainable development.”*



*INT7: “They were directly in touch with us from the Ministry of Environment [...] we had some good discussions and came to the conclusion that we definitely want to be part of this.”*

**Conclusion to P2.4:** It can be concluded that in this case this proposition holds true as interviewees explicitly expressed that a high level of involvement had a relevant role concerning committing to the national strategy. There was also a direct correlation between the companies who had been and were closely involved with the FNCSD regarding the national strategy and their level of commitment: the commitment was significantly higher than among those companies who were not familiar with the national strategy or who did not feel involved in the strategy process, either directly or by having their feedback considered in the strategy work.

*INT5: “We came on board after receiving a personal invite to a workshop [...] hearing what has been done along the way and how the ideas at the workshop have been implemented and taken forward has been a good thing.”*

#### **P2.5: Leadership in the government body affects stakeholders’ perception of the communication**

Regarding the more relational perspective of communication, nearly all respondents synonymously linked the nature of leadership with the nature of the communication. Only one respondent felt that leadership did not play such a heavy role, but argued that strong content would make a greater difference in communication. These impressions can be felt in the following comments:

*INT7: “[...] the government is still fairly in silos and if you think about sustainable development, it’s a very cross-disciplinary issue. [...] depending on which governmental silo the sustainability issue falls into will affect how it is perceived externally, what kind of salience it will receive and how it will be communicated.”*

*INT1: “I would not say that leadership plays such a prominent role in communication if the initiative for sustainable development itself is solid enough.”*

One of the most distinguishable topics regarding the role of leadership in communication was that unified leadership made communication seem more consistent and coherent to respondents. As touched upon in the quote from **INT7**, consistency in government communication was regarded as a key issue in communicating about issues on sustainable development, as the sender would impact the angle of the content: different Ministries for instance would stress different aspects due to their own focus areas. Furthermore, in addition to being united, the actual act of unifying also gained prominence during the interview discussions: it became clear that having a leader managing and unifying all activities related to the national strategy in a consistent manner was seen to contribute to better sense of structure and engagement. This “unifying” behavior gave companies the impression of having their efforts included as part of the bigger picture –in other words, receiving a message of being sure that their operations were in line with overarching societal and governmental goals, and so ultimately, in line with legally regulative aims and aspirations.

*INT2: “I myself also had some questions about what the added value of this was, what it would bring if we were to make commitments as a single company...but then it still has this unifying the body and the government supports companies’ efforts. In other words, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, but this can be communicated all together and in a larger societal context.”*

*INT5: “The cooperation between enterprises regarding sustainable development could also be highlighted: it is one of the few areas in which the companies will cooperate more than compete. The government could therefore bring together all these collective efforts and emphasize this message in its communication.”*

Another issue that surfaced during the interview was the need for leadership to adopt a stronger marketing approach to their communication: it was seen as the FNCSD’s role to actively “sell” the national strategy by being present at different forums to make sure that the communication would gain the salience it was seen to require. Additionally, working to make the commitment matter to a company’s operation “drivers” and focusing communication at stakeholders and the greater public was given weight during interviews. The FNCSD was also expected to make communication about the national strategy practical. In other words, **showing** companies practical examples on what is or can be done and **telling** them explicitly what this means to and requires from them.

*INT1: “There should probably be more sales work done for the national commitment. [...] They should be more present at different events and partake in discussions...or give presentations about the national strategy to boost its visibility and to engage companies.”*

*INT3: “They need to move away from “sing and dance” to “show and tell”.”*

Moving from the explicit link between the nature of leadership and the nature of communication, a surprising amount of comments were given with regards to what was considered as appropriate or good leadership in the case of communication work linked to the national strategy. On this topic there was a solid agreement that involving the widest range of stakeholders possible and considering all input and diverse views was the basis of good leadership and thus a basis for the credibility of the FNCSD and their communication. The idea of collaboration remained thus in the center of advancing, managing and communicating about the national strategy, and the FNCSD was considered to have a role in creating this sense of collaboration and adding meaningfulness to the work around the national strategy. The following quotes demonstrate these sentiments:

*INT3: “Communication should, therefore, consider all target groups, without leaving out the so-called skeptics. [...] there will be no fruitful results if someone is left out, even if it were a critical voice. I think that the more you get public and private entities to work on and focus on the same goals it will automatically generate more dialogue and a better understanding of what is needed.”*

*INT8: “It is imperative to increase cooperation and to bring governmental and the companies' own initiatives together.”*

*INT2: “They should take the approach of communicating this in a way that shows that this is truly an initiative backed up by the government, its different ministries and prominent actors and it is something that looks far into the future, creating the foundation for future business opportunities.”*

In addition to leading on collaborative efforts, interviewees saw that indispensable attributes of good leadership were better moderation of communication and feedback around the activities of the national strategy; more targeted focusing of corporate contact points for the communication within management; and predictability and regularity in communication. It was also suggested that the FNCSD act as a stronger moderator and coach companies into looking beyond simply the national strategy and into the core of their operations and mission.

*INT2: “For more impact, messages should be targeted to upper management and not only people responsible for corporate social responsibility or sustainability - the commitment is not only about corporate responsibility. They should demand a more novel angle and energizing input from companies: what do you want to be in the future and what would be the angle which is not already self-evident to you and what we have not yet communicated as a responsible employer.”*

*INT4: “Issues should be communicated when they’re being processed as opposed when they’re already done.”*

**Conclusion to P2.5:** The link between the nature of leadership within the government body and communication was more supported than contested during interview discussions. Additionally, respondents had strong views about what type of leadership they aspired to have or what they felt was appropriate regarding the case of national strategy on sustainable development: leading the communication approach to showing and telling specifically what was expected from companies and what value these actions would result in.

**Summary to RQ2) How is the FNCSD’s communication about the national strategy on sustainable development perceived by corporate stakeholders:**

To summarize the findings for the first research question, three out of the five propositions linked to RQ2 were either fully or partly contradicted with regards to this case study while the remaining two propositions were mainly supported by the findings. Regarding one of the contradicted propositions (P2.1) *Finnish companies approach commitment to sustainable development and communication about*

*sustainable development with rhetoric of “weak” sustainability*), although there seemed to be no unanimous definition of sustainable development, organizational activities and aspirations were driven by more than simply the legal and environmental requirements set for it. Suggesting, in other words, that there is no one way of defining the concept, but that Finnish companies would generally employ a strong rather than weak rhetoric of sustainable development. The win-win ethos evident in the comments of interviewees shows them perceiving sustainable development as an indispensable dimension of corporate responsibility and a significant issue to the company’s stakeholders. This in turn made companies generally more receptive of the communication of the FNCSD regarding the national strategy.

**Credibility and trustworthiness of FNCSD not questioned:** Although issues relating to the credibility and trustworthiness of both the FNCSD and the communication of the FNCSD surfaced in all interviews, neither one of these attributes was actually challenged as suggested by the second (and partly) contradicted proposition (P2.2) *The credibility and trustworthiness of government communication is often questioned*). Instead, interviewees would focus on aspects that would further enhance the credibility of the FNCSD and the communication carried out by it. Most significant factors reinforcing the dimensions of credibility and trustworthiness were seen to be the 1) the diversity of the network or the actors involved 2) the continuity and predictability of messaging (as in not having overlaps with other Ministries or government bodies) 3) a strong stakeholder involvement and 4) having intermediaries and more neutrally viewed third parties involved in the communication work.

**Communication characterized as having personal approach; aim of national strategy widely supported:** Regarding the FNCSD’s communications on a very general level, the communications had a reasonably personal nature. This can be explained by the high involvement and personal approach of the Deputy Secretary of the FNCSD, Marja Innanen, when contacting companies. All interviewees had complementary views as to what were the main communication channels used at the moment in communicating about the national strategy: email, social media, newsletter and personal contact were mentioned as being the most frequent and prominent channels in general. All of the interviewees considered organizations active in sustainable development to be more competitive and competent as opposed to organizations not taking into account the perspective of sustainable development in their organizational activities or communication.

**Communication should approach stakeholders via “gatekeepers” and events:** The perceived image of the national strategy was that it was a noble and noteworthy initiative that had not gained great salience among the business community nor the public. Respondents would also automatically highlight key points of development in the communication work on the national strategy. These generally included using communicational “gatekeepers” in the form of association and thought leaders, as well as organizing and participating in live events and forums in order to have stronger visibility and presence in places where companies would normally look for information. This view implies that the communication done by the FNCSD is seen to still have many areas to improve on in order to better reach private sector stakeholders. Overall, interviewees would mainly share these same experiences and perceptions of the communicational practices by the FNCSD regarding the national strategy. This in turn contradicted proposition *P2.3: Perceptions of government communications vary from company to company*.

**Highly involved companies perceived communication more positively:** How the interviewees perceived the FNCSD’s communication was also affected by the level of involvement they or their company had with the FNCSD and the national strategy: there was a strong correlation between the levels of involvement of the company and how positively they perceived the communication about, and the activities related to the national strategy. In other words, companies who were involved in the working progress of the national strategy spoke more positively of the communication as well as the national strategy itself as they would feel a stronger ownership towards it. Moreover, the level of commitment and enthusiasm towards committing to the national strategy in general was significantly higher among those companies who had been feel involved in the process, either directly or by feeling that their opinions are taken into account in the strategy work.

**Clarity in both governance and leadership prerequisite for effective and well received communication:** The connection between the nature of leadership of the FNCSD and its effect on the FNCSD’s communication was fairly significant: respondents who felt that the general management of the FNCSD was dispersed, incoherent or unbalanced with regards to adequate diversity of viewpoints within the executive actors would also more readily criticize the communication and the national strategy itself. Overall, good communication was dependent on good leadership which in turn was

generally considered to include the following characteristics: inspiring and involving all stakeholders, significant moderation of communication and feedback, and finally a strong marketing approach to communication in “selling” the national strategy to both the business community and the public. Finally, to crystalize the underlying sentiment from interviews, ideal leadership that would support communication would take on the approach of “**showing and telling**” – in other words, making sure to make it clear what committing to the national strategy meant in practice and what concrete value it would bring.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

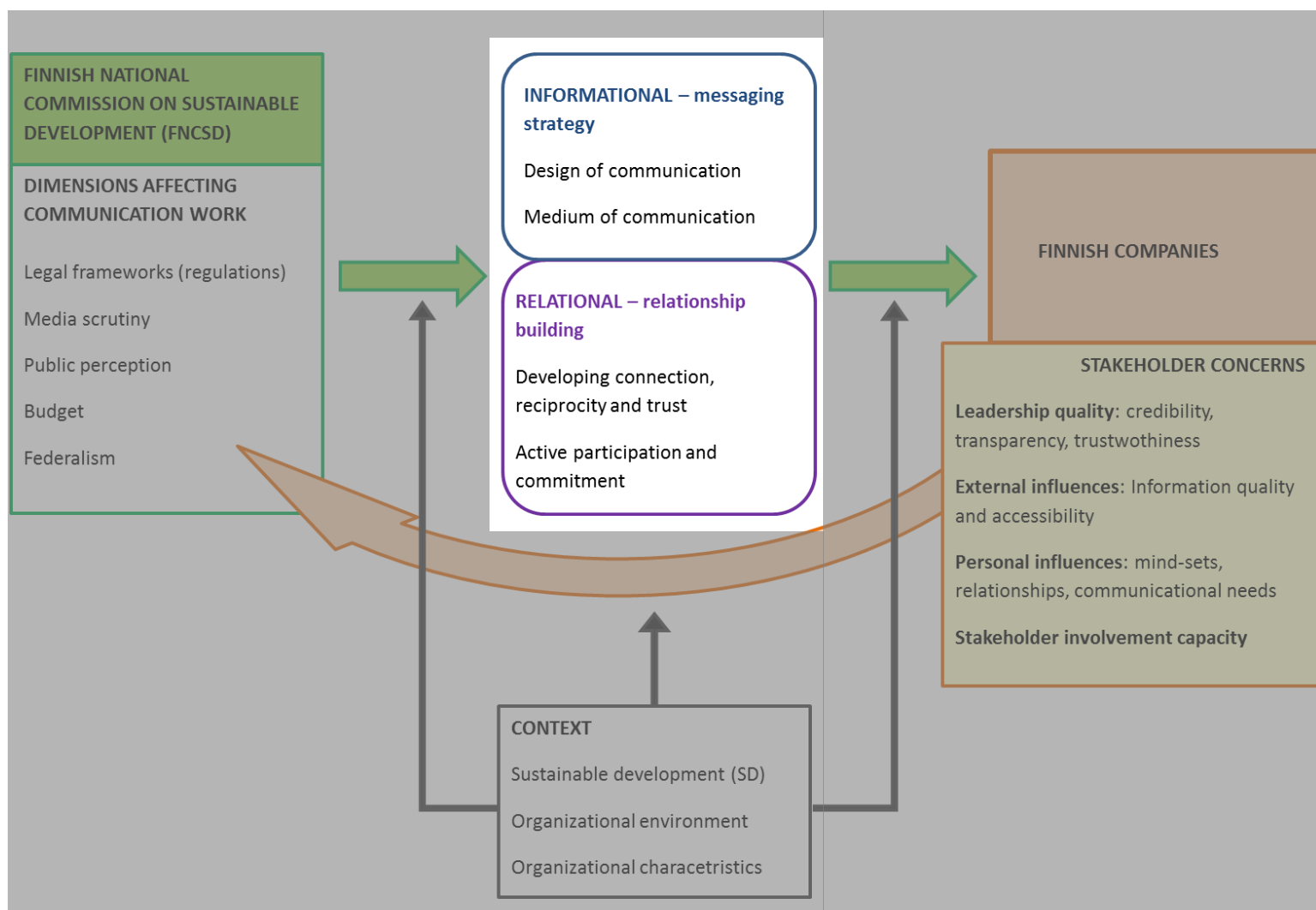
This chapter offers practical recommendations to better plan develop and improve the FNCSD's communication practices from the private sector stakeholders' perspective. The following recommendations are based on interview data, previous knowledge gained from the literature and finally the findings being linked and analyzed by using the analytical framework.

### **5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CREATION OF A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR THE FNCSD**

Khan and Gerrard (2005) underline that a communications plan can help organizations establish and maintain credibility by “setting the agenda and an open discussion process” (p.198). Helin et al. (2013) also add that a communications plan has a strong correlation with an organization's trustworthiness and good reputation. Trust in turn is generated with accountability and transparency: an organization's ability to deal with issues as they arise and communicate with stakeholders often and early is key in building a solid bond of trustworthiness and reputation with them. In the realm of sustainable development, it is crucial that the “knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders, as they relate to the full strata of physical and emotional factors relating to issues on sustainability, be understood, acknowledged and addressed” (Khan and Gerrard, 2005, p.192).

Doorley and Garcia (2007, p. 287) underline that there are some factors that should be analyzed when developing a strategic communications plan: these include the organization's strategy, environment, individuals, media, messages, feedback and measurement, structure and budget. In the analytical framework of this study, the central dimensions of the communication flow between the FNCSD and the stakeholders cover the communicator, the design of the message, the channel, the receiver and the response. Regarding each point, there are several external issues mapped out that have the potential to influence the favorable outcome of the communication. The FNCSD should consider –and preferably further analyze – each point separately when developing their communication plan. Overall, the framework can be used as a tool in guiding the FNCSD's planning process and by thoroughly examining each phase in the analytical framework all key aspects of communication are addressed and thus included in the final communication plan.





**Fig 5.** The Analytical Framework

As Chapter 4 on Findings aimed at gaining a good overall understanding of both the communicational work of the FNCSO and the perceptions of the communication from the corporate stakeholders as well as the factors affecting these two, the following section focuses on giving guidelines on improving the process of stakeholder communication (represented by the informational and relational dimensions of the communication) taking place between the two parties (FNCSO and Finnish companies).

The following recommendations are presented with the help of a table in order to best define the suggestion for possible implementation, their expected outcome and finally a justification for the recommendation. The recommendations are divided under the subheadings of “relational” and “informational”. The recommendations under the subheadings take into account the external factors affecting the communication discussed in Chapter 4 (Findings).

## RELATIONAL APPROACH - Developing connection, reciprocity and trust

Dialogue and engagement		
Suggestion	Expected outcome	Justification
<p>Increase dialogue and facilitate conversations with private sector.</p> <p>Organize regular face-to-face events and enable more informal communication.</p> <p>Make sure that issues are discussed, processed and refined together - both with those who are part of the national strategy and those still hesitating to join.</p>	<p>Better understanding on the side of the stakeholders - what added value the national strategy would bring and what it requires from them.</p> <p>Encouraged knowledge sharing and faster feedback cycle - ensure continuous improvement of both the national strategy and the communication.</p>	<p>Having companies tightly linked to the entire process via constant feedback would ensure that the strategy coming out of the FNCSD also addresses stakeholder needs.</p> <p>Using richer communication media, such as face-to-face contact, would serve to decrease misunderstandings and ambiguity related to SD in general that might otherwise occur when using so called leaner media.</p> <p>Engaging a diverse a group as possible was considered a prerequisite for the FNCSD in maintaining and building its own license to operate.</p>
Marketing approach		
Suggestion	Expected outcome	Justification
<p>Focus on branding the national strategy and “sell” it by tailoring the communication to each company.</p> <p>Be present and promote the national strategy at relevant industry fairs and forums via presentations and active networking.</p>	<p>Improved awareness, stronger image.</p> <p>Communication reaches the stakeholders.</p>	<p>The findings called for a better use of marketing and corporate communication practices in strengthening the image of the national strategy.</p> <p>It was seen as the FNCSD’s</p>

		responsibility and duty to be visible at forums and raise awareness of the strategy.
<b>Clear governance</b>		
<b>Suggestion</b>	<b>Expected outcome</b>	<b>Justification</b>
<p>Move the FNCSD out from under the Ministry of Environment.</p> <p>Harmonize initiatives and communication from the government and make sure that there are no overlaps or perceived competition between initiatives and government bodies.</p>	<p>Improved and clearer image of the national strategy in the eyes of stakeholders – increased trustworthiness and credibility.</p> <p>Renders communication and responsibilities more understandable.</p>	<p>As the FNCSD is currently placed under the Ministry of Environment, respondents tended to focus on simply the environmental aspects of the national strategy.</p> <p>Consistency in communication is also based on consistency in communicators and strategy.</p>
<b>Measurement, evaluation and knowledge of stakeholders</b>		
<b>Suggestion</b>	<b>Expected outcome</b>	<b>Justification</b>
<p>Define the objectives and goals of the communication for the national strategy.</p> <p>Agree on indicators with which to measure the communication. Agree on responsibility of communication and allocate appropriate resources.</p> <p>Study the current as well as the potential and desired stakeholder groups and map out their needs.</p>	<p>Easier evaluation of the outcomes and success of the communication.</p> <p>Communication is designed appropriately and effectively.</p>	<p>Objectives and goals need to be clearly defined order to be able to evaluate the communication.</p> <p>Successful communication requires the identification of stakeholders and their specific needs</p>

## RELATIONAL APPROACH - Active participation and commitment

Influencing external drivers		
Suggestion	Expected outcome	Justification
Create a communication campaign that raises awareness of the national strategy among the general public.	Society's increased interest in and awareness of the national strategy will raise its relevance in the eyes of the company.	In order to persuade companies, other stakeholders also need to be persuaded: regarding companies this would include primary drivers such as customers and shareholders for example.
Focusing on management		
Suggestion	Expected outcome	Justification
<p>Tailor messages in a manner that makes them easy to be diffused and forwarded to a larger pool of people.</p> <p>Target messages to upper management.</p>	Responsibility of committing to sustainability issues does not fall simply on the shoulders of certain employees.	Convincing people in executive positions will give the national strategy higher importance within the organization. Enlarging the pool of people that can be reached will decrease possible bottlenecks in dealing with the national strategy.

## INFORMATIONAL APPROACH - Design of communication

Consistent key messages		
Suggestion	Expected outcome	Justification
Identify key messages and communicate them in a consistent manner: stakeholders should be able to identify and understand the core goal of the national strategy is without	The national strategy, its goals, values and "call to action" are clear to stakeholders.	The content of the messaging and messages should be crafted in a way that they answer to the concerns and questions of companies. Companies

any difficulties.		will not commit to something that they feel is ambiguous.
<b>Highlight strategic relevance</b>		
<b>Suggestion</b>	<b>Expected outcome</b>	<b>Justification</b>
<p>In the communication, frame participation in the national strategy as an essential part of a company's reason to exist, as the core of <i>their</i> strategy.</p> <p>Highlight the national strategy as a tool to streamline operations in a way that they are aligned with grander societal goals.</p>	<p>Companies commit and stay committed to the strategy in the longer term.</p> <p>Companies take faster and more favorable decisions on whether to commit to the national strategy or not.</p>	<p>The commitment is currently perceived as another initiative among others that would just add a superficial boost to the brand of the company. It needs to be made relevant to the company's mission and operational performance.</p>
<b>Practical examples and approachability</b>		
<b>Suggestion</b>	<b>Expected outcome</b>	<b>Justification</b>
<p>Decrease ambiguity in content – communicate to stakeholders in a concrete and understandable format that offers practical examples.</p> <p>Offer concrete success stories from companies who have already committed to the national strategy. Make material readily available and easily accessible.</p> <p>Make clear to companies how many and what types of commitments have been placed and in what topical area of the national strategy.</p>	<p>Better exchange of ideas in terms of what other companies are already doing regarding sustainable development and what ideas could be done or even copied.</p>	<p>Companies often faced challenges when trying to translate the national strategy into practical action.</p> <p>Companies were interested in what type of actions others had taken regarding the national strategy.</p> <p>Having easily accessible material will lower the bar for companies to use it in their own communication materials.</p>

International dimension		
Suggestion	Expected outcome	Justification
Show a stronger link to the global UN framework from which the national strategy is derived.	Increased awareness of the national strategy both globally and locally.	The national strategy was considered more impactful if it were to have a strong global political agenda to support it.
Underline the international relevance and visibility of the national strategy.	Increased value and attractiveness of the strategy in the eyes of stakeholders and in being able to leverage the “Finland”-brand.	SMEs saw that they would gain salience by being able to anchor themselves to the strategy’s international “brand awareness”.
Promote the national strategy at international forums and emphasize the “Finnish” brand; Finland as a responsible country and as a supporter of responsible business.	Information available for international audiences and potential partners.	Larger corporations felt a global perspective was a must as so many operate either directly or indirectly in or with global markets.
Develop web pages or material for international audiences.		

### INFORMATIONAL APPROACH - Medium of communication

Improve current channels		
Suggestion	Expected outcome	Justification
Invite feedback to improve the regular newsletter sent out to stakeholders.	The newsletter will include most significant items for stakeholders.	The newsletter was often mentioned as the main source of updates and was appreciated among the stakeholders.
Ensure regular communication on each social media channel. Collect, cross-reference and use information gathered from different channels.	Current channels receive higher awareness, engagement and following. They are seen as real time sources of information.	Not all respondents followed all social media – harmonizing the communication across social media channels would guarantee that stakeholders have access to the same
Investigate possibilities of improving existing social media channels.	Reacting efficiently to changes	

Establish the national strategy's website as the main landing page for practical information that is well structured.	<p>in the surrounding environment.</p> <p>Reaching young people and general public.</p> <p>Clarity in the minds of stakeholders as to where they can find reliable and relevant information.</p>	<p>information.</p> <p>Influencing external drivers was seen as influencing companies to change working practices.</p> <p>The website was known to all stakeholders but they felt that finding the appropriate information was at times challenging.</p>
<b>Intermediaries and stakeholder network</b>		
<b>Suggestion</b>	<b>Expected outcome</b>	<b>Justification</b>
<p>Assign individual "Ambassadors" to the national strategy from within a pool of identified key people to speak on behalf of the national strategy.</p> <p>Create communication partnerships with trade unions and business associations.</p> <p>Leverage the network of companies already part of the national strategy and suggest communicational guidelines as to how they can further communicate about the national strategy.</p>	<p>Communication about the national strategy is diffused across a larger network of actors and industries and via the key "gatekeepers" or influencers of companies.</p> <p>Distance between the stakeholders and the FNCSD is bridged.</p>	<p>Besides potential cost advantages, the use of such intermediaries offer another opportunity for two-way communication, better transmission of feedback.</p> <p>Findings suggested that third parties provided a more credible, convincing source of information and were the primary places (unions, associations) where they would seek up-to-date information from.</p>

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This section provides a main summary of the research goals, methods and findings. The chapter is divided into four sections. Section 6.1 provides a summary of the present Thesis study, section 6.2 sums up the main findings of the research. The limitations of the study are introduced in section 6.3 and finally, section 6.4 suggests areas for further research.

### **6.1 RESEARCH SUMMARY**

The purpose of this study was to shed light on how stakeholder communication is practiced in the government to business (G2B) sector in Finland, and particularly how it is practiced in the context of sustainable development. As there has been little research done on the spectrum of government communication (public diplomacy) initiatives that would display how exactly political entities communicate with their key stakeholders, evaluating the impact and patterns of use of government communication remains very challenging (Howlett, Craft and Zibrik, 2010).

Due to the lack of studies related to communication in G2B relationships with regards to sustainable development, the specific objective of this Thesis is to study how a government body works to communicate about sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders and how this communication is perceived by business stakeholders in Finland. Combining stakeholder communication theory with the governmental sector (faced with challenges such as a complex operating environment and limited resources) and the context of the much discussed cross-cutting theme of sustainable development is a fairly new approach.

In order to narrow the scope of the research, this study focused on a specific case organization and investigated the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development's (FNCSO) communication practices with the key stakeholder group of Finnish companies in the context of sustainable development. It concentrated on exploring the communication of this specific relationship between a government body and private sector stakeholders, aiming to understand how a government body (the FNCSO) communicates about sustainable development and policy goals related to sustainable development to private sector stakeholders.



The main research questions of the Thesis were the following:

**RQ1: How is the Finnish National Commission's communication about the national strategy perceived by corporate stakeholders?**

**RQ2: In what ways should the FN Commission work to communicate about the national strategy on sustainable development to its corporate stakeholders?**

The analytical framework presented in Chapter 2 was tightly anchored to the literature review and helped in guiding the research process and in organizing data and findings. The framework was created by combining the most essential matters discussed in the literature review. It was based on the Leadership-Stakeholder Involvement Capacity (LSIC) nexus framework by Waligo et al. (2014), the government communication decision wheel by Liu et al. (2010) which assigns nine primary environmental attributes that influence the strategies of dissemination that government communicators select, as well as the informational and relational frameworks for communication proposed by Zaharna (2010) for public diplomacy analysis.

The current Thesis was a qualitative study comprising of twelve semi-structured, thematic interviews out of which seven were carried out face-to-face and three were done over the phone. The analysis of the interviews resulted in an astute understanding of the present state of the case organization's communication, of their private sector stakeholders' needs and concerns, as well as of the current relationship between the two.

Finally, this study contributed to corporate communication research in the following way: firstly, it demonstrated how corporate communication theory can not only be applied, to but also contribute to the value creation via effective stakeholder communication for a grander scope of organizations, such as the FNCSO that operates in the public sector. Secondly, as engaging in closer cooperation and improving communication with the private sector on the topic of sustainable development is an exercise that is not only faced by the Finnish government, but by governments across the globe, being able to draw on presented recommendations that can be potentially scaled up and shared inter- and intragovernmentally is an additional value brought by this study.

## 6.2 MAIN FINDINGS

This section highlights the main findings of the study discussed more in depth in Chapter 4 and 5. They are presented according to the themes of the two main research questions: the FNCSD's work involved in the stakeholder communication on the national strategy on sustainable development and the stakeholders' perception of the FNCSD's communication on the national strategy on sustainable development. How the operational environment on communication affected the perception and actual communication was taken into account when conducting the data collection and incorporated into the analysis, findings and recommendations.

To crystalize key findings and the underlying sentiment from all interviews, the FNCSD should take the approach of “**showing and telling**” to ensure positively perceived communication from the side of the corporate stakeholders. In other words, explicitly communicating clear key messages and making sure to make it clear to companies what committing to the national strategy meant in practice and what concrete value it would bring to them.

**The complex communication environment and conflicting expectations affected the communication work of the FNCSD:** the FNCSD struggles in finding a balance between the starkly opposing demands from stakeholders to adopt a stronger marketing orientation in their communication, and the constraints and expectations from Finnish governance and politics regarding government communication and diplomacy. The FNCSD also faces challenges in best adapting their communication activities to the scarce resources they have available to them. Despite the challenging environmental factors to consider in their communication activities, the **FNCSD does aim to conduct communication about the national strategy in a strategic manner**. Nonetheless they have not managed to leverage the social interaction with their private sector stakeholder to gain a wider awareness and commitment to the national strategy.

The interviews also brought up additional findings that were indirectly related to the research question: based on the discussions on what stakeholders seemed to envisage as ideal communication, the FNCSD should continue on the path of **stronger branding and campaigning**. Regarding the content of the communication, **the points considered to be most worthy of highlighting in future stakeholder communication were the internationality and the global dimension of the national strategy**.

Interviewees felt that being able to anchor their company's operations to globally renowned frameworks and initiatives was essential as many of them operated either directly or indirectly in or with global markets

**Credibility and trustworthiness of FNCSD not questioned but rather defined:** although issues relating to the credibility and trustworthiness of both the FNCSD and the communication of the FNCSD surfaced in all interviews, neither one of these attributes was actually challenged. For instance **clarity in both governance and leadership were seen as a prerequisite for effective and well received communication:** The connection between the nature of leadership of the FNCSD and its effect on the FNCSD's communication was fairly significant: respondents who felt that the general management of the FNCSD was dispersed, incoherent or unbalanced with regards to adequate diversity of viewpoints within the executive actors would also more readily criticize the communication and the national strategy itself.

**There was a pull for communication to approach stakeholders via “gatekeepers” and events:** the perceived image of the national strategy was that it was a noble and noteworthy initiative that had not gained great salience among the business community nor the public. There was also a strong demand from respondents for direct two-way communication, and preferably live, channels or forums of interaction with the FNCSD as well as the use of strategic intermediaries in order to improve the dialogue between the organizations and the government body. This was especially important as **highly involved companies perceived communication more positively:** companies who were involved in the working progress of the national strategy spoke more positively of the communication as well as the national strategy itself as they would feel a stronger ownership towards it.

### **6.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

This section examines the limitations of the Thesis and considers the study from a more critical standpoint. It is important to consider these limitations when interpreting the study; nevertheless, they do not decrease the trustworthiness of the findings.

The first limitation of the study was the amount of resources available to the researcher: working as a single individual within a restricted timeframe sets challenges on the potential breadth and depth of the research and the findings.

The second limitation of the Thesis was that the empirical part consisted of a qualitative study of a single case organization. Therefore, the results are fully applicable as such only for this specific case. This in turn limits the possibility of generalizing the results; however, they can be used as good guidelines for future research and for similar organizations.

The third limitation of the Thesis was related to the method of data collection: the research was accomplished by carrying out semi-structured, thematic interviews which were then translated from Finnish to English by the researcher. The results of this type of data collection technique are always dependent on the interviewer's own interpretations.

Another potential limitation of the study is the fact that the present researcher has worked extensively with projects around sustainable development and worked with the FNCSD in a professional capacity. Consequently, there is a chance that the researcher might have coaxed the interviews into a certain direction. However, to ensure that this would not occur, a thematic format for the semi-structures interview was created and the researcher made a conscious effort not offer private opinions during the interviews or to interrupt the interviewees. The interviewees were also encouraged to discuss subjects they felt were essential.

## **6.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

There are various areas in this Thesis study that could be elaborated on and examined further and the FNCSD as a case organization offers ample possibilities for additional research. The organizational structure, the specific sustainability-related content of the communication and characteristics of the challenging operational environment of the FNCSD offer themes that could be extended to the field of research. The present study suggests at least three directions for further research:

Firstly, further studies might consider concentrating on examining the impact that stakeholder communications have on the FNCSD's reputation creation processes. Secondly, more research attention could be given to the role of third parties, "gatekeepers" and intermediaries in conducting sustainability related stakeholder communication between an organization and stakeholders. Finally,

further research could look into the role of communication in the specific, internal decision-making processes within companies when deciding whether to commit to the national strategy or not.

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